

The Dawn of the Witch

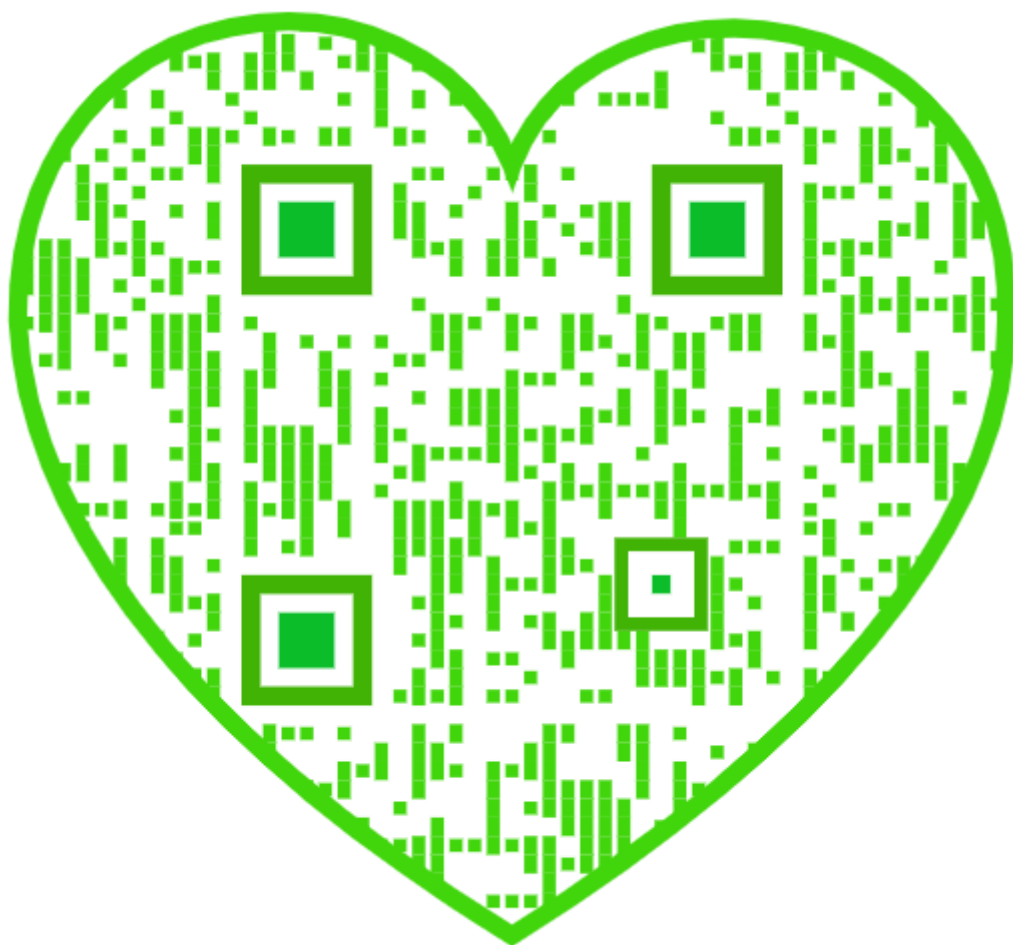
The Demon of Obsession

4



By Kakeru Kobashiri
Art by Takashi Iwasaki

Original Design of Select Characters by
Yoshinori Shizuma



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Blubbering like a child,
he caught up the diminutive
witch and spun her around
like they were acting out a
scene in a play.

"O-Oi, hold a moment!
Fianos, calm thyself!"

"I missed you!
I missed you!
Oh, how I missed you!"



"That is *not* what I meant! Enough! I've changed my mind! I want you out of here after all, you eyesore!"

"You're adorbs! There's a good girl! There, there!"

"Dammit, I won't forget this!"

"Whoa, you really do sound like a small-time thug when you say stuff like that, Kudo. Keep going, it's a riot."



Los raised an eyebrow.

*"This is far more dramatic,
think you not?"*

She yanked Saybil's hand, and as
he staggered forward, she pushed
her tongue between his lips.

C O N T E N T S

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Epilogue



Illustrations by Takashi Iwasaki
Original Design of Select Characters by Yoshinori Shizuma
Design Yuko Mukadeya + Atsushi Ogue (Musicago Graphics)
Original Editor Satoshi Shoji

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A VERTICAL Book

Translator: Ben Trethewey

Editor: Daniel Joseph

Production: Tomoe Tsutsumi

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KODANSHA

The
Dawn
of the
Witch

The
Demon
of
Obsession

I always longed for family. Always dreamed of having parents—of the idea of it all.

Even though children are just useless hindrances who do nothing but get in the way, parents still shower them with love. What *is* that unconditional love they feel? What does it mean to love someone without asking for anything in return?

Or maybe it's all for the prosperity of their bloodline? Is it just the biological instinct of parents to foster strong children for the sake of future generations? Is that what people call love?

No.

No, it's not just that.

I know there's more to it than that.

I know there's love that *isn't* directed toward children.

I know there are children who are despised instead of loved.

I wanted to be loved.

I wanted to know that joy.

That's why I decided to do it.

To create the perfect family.



Chapter One



In the northern reaches of the Great Continent stretched a gray world tinged with death. According to one book, “The withered trees are so twisted that their tops plunge back into the ground, appearing almost like wooden gateways welcoming travelers to the underworld.” The book continues: “It is like walking into the nightmares of a troubled mind.”

No ordinary living thing could last in that land—meaning that, generally speaking, anyone or anything that did survive was far from normal.

Lively voices suddenly rose from the gray, out of place amid the gloom.

“Sayb, look! This deer’s got blades for antlers!!”

“Bird over here’s got fangs...! An’ the spurs growin’ out of its feet look like they’re actually made of metal!”

“Whoa, amazing... So there really *are* things like these just wandering around up here...”

It was midday, and still early in Saybil, Hort, and Kudo’s eleven-day expedition—only the third day, in fact, and the three were excitedly setting about the task they had just been assigned: preparing lunch.

“Gosh... I can’t believe we’re really here!” exclaimed Hort.

“Yeah,” Saybil agreed. “Since we weren’t even allowed to look out of the carriage on the way, this is the first time we’re seeing anything that really *looks* like the North.”

“Didn’t think it’d be so safe, to be honest. What a frikkin’ letdown,” moaned

Kudo. “We only ever end up campin’ or takin’ breaks in places the Mage Battalion’s already swept for us...”

“Huh? But weren’t you, like, attacked by a bunch of demons in the North that one time, Kudo? So aren’t you used to all this anyway?”

Kudo shrugged off her question as he cut the head and legs from the strange bird. “I was under a pile of rubble, locked in some cage. First I heard ’bout the destruction of the North was after the Dragon Conqueror King had rescued me and I was already on my way south to Wenias. That time they told us to keep our heads in the damn carriage no matter what, too, but...”

“But...?”

“There was one idiot who didn’t listen. When he pulled his head back inside, it had turned into a flower.”

“Wait, his head...?”

“Did you say a *flower*...?”

Hort and Saybil couldn’t quite process what Kudo had said. As they struggled to form a mental picture, he went on.

“Dude was still alive, too. The Mage Battalion couldn’t help the guy, so they brought him back to the capital. But in the end, he withered and died, from what I heard.”

“Are we maybe in, like, a super, *super* dangerous place right now?!” Hort cried.

“What, you’re only just realizin’ that now? Why’d you think we were travelin’ in a wooden carriage that’s locked from the outside and doesn’t even have any damn windows? This place is seriously dangerous, no joke.”

Now I see, nodded Saybil, accepting the reality of their situation a little late in the game himself.

With illumination from Solm the inside of the carriage was perfectly bright, and it was spacious enough for all of them to sleep comfortably, so they had no complaints on that front... But on the road they were treated very much like luggage.

The Dawn Witch Loux Krystas, on the other hand, had been with the vanguard since day one of their expedition, frequently disappearing alone into the forest and reappearing at lunchtime with strange tales of her exploits.

“Isn’t it dangerous for you to be alone in the forest...?” Saybil had asked, but she waved away his worries.

“I am not alone. I have my little Ludens for company.”

Mage Commander Amnir had at first ordered her to refrain from such independent action...but upon seeing how she could vanish on a whim and return with such valuable information, Amnir seemingly resigned herself to thinking of the witch as a fairy of some sort, free to come and go as she pleased.

Despite her appearance however, Loux Krystas was no innocent young girl—she was an ancient witch who had lived for over three hundred years.

“Even though this place is so dangerous, there are still animals that are okay to eat. I couldn’t believe it at first, the textbook never mentioned anything like that! I want to put it all in the book I’m gonna write,” Saybil announced.

The Disasters of the North—on that day, a third of the continent was wiped out in one fell swoop. Few survived the calamity, and fewer still told of their experiences. The North was a gray land, faded with despair—and only two books in the world contained descriptions of it. One of them was the textbook used at

the Academy of Magic. The other was issued by the Forbidden Library, which still stood amid the ruins of the North, and while its author was unknown, it was rumored to have been written by the chief librarian himself.

Upon graduating from the Academy of Magic, Saybil, Hort, and Kudo had accepted a commission from their former headmaster, Albus, to investigate the northern part of the Great Continent—and to research the so-called Remnants of Disaster in particular.

I'm sure finding out whether the Remnants are edible or not will come in handy at some point, thought Saybil. “I bet I could fill a whole volume with the way the things here taste, how to cook them, stuff like that. Don’t you think?”

“A Remnants of Disaster cookbook? That’d be useful, sure, but aren’t you worried you’ll poison yourself or somethin’?”

“I figure I’ll be fine as long as you’re around, Kudo.”

“Not even I could help if you just dropped dead on the spot. You know that, right...?”

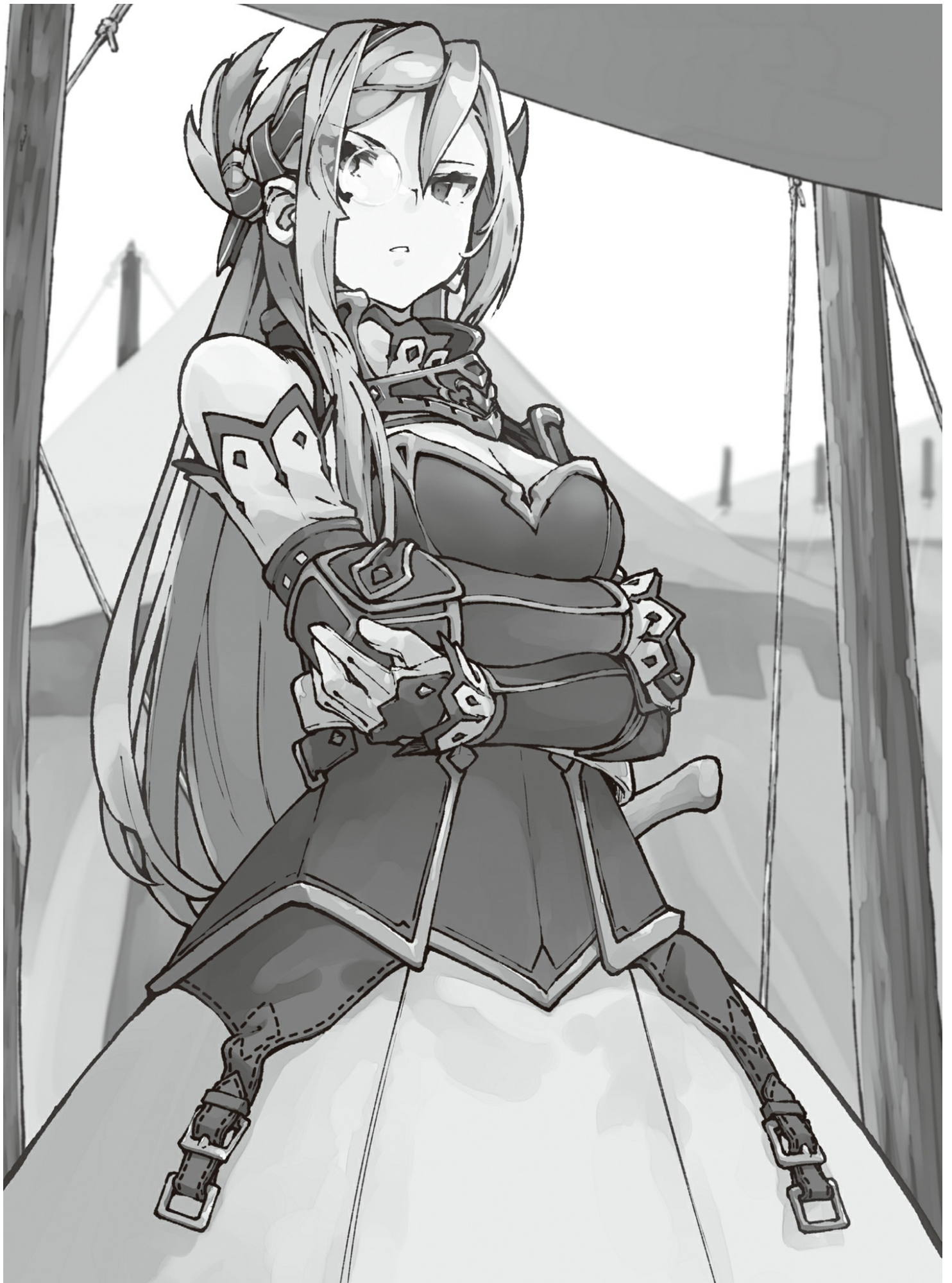
“Not all poisons take effect immediately, mind you. I have heard tell of people enjoying a sweet fruit, only for their bodies to be slowly devoured from the inside over the course of a full month.”

“Huh—Commander Amnir?!”

A regal woman stood there, her sharp glare piercing the three mages as they cooked and chatted. Her eyes themselves were a gentle shade of ruddy brown, but perhaps it was the conspicuous monocle covering the right one that made her seem so terribly intense. And appearances were not deceiving—Mage Commander Amnir was in fact a stern and superbly powerful woman.

“Especially when it comes to demonic curses, we have no way of knowing

what will occur. The meat you are currently preparing was only deemed fit for consumption once our other stores of food were almost spent and we were forced to partake out of pure necessity.”



“Thank goodness it turned out to be safe.”

“I consumed it only *after* confirming that it was.” Commander Amnir’s expression turned icy.

Saybil thought for a moment about her words.

“Meaning...you had it tasted for poison?”

“Indeed. I had half my unit eat it, and tasked the other half with observing them for the following seven days. Many of the poisons contained within the Remnants of Disaster only affect humans who meet certain criteria. Asking only one or two soldiers to test the meat for poison would have provided no guarantee of its safety.”

“But, half your unit...?” Saybil was incredulous.

“Had one half died, their share of the rations would have gone to the survivors.”

“...Terrifying.”

“It’s only proper that a commander be feared.”

“Oh, no, that’s not what I meant...” In the face of Amnir’s composed smile, Saybil rushed to explain. “I was just imagining if I was in charge, and I had to make that kind of decision or my whole unit would die... Just thinking about spending the days praying for nobody to get sick... It’s really scary to consider.”

Amnir opened her mouth as if about to speak, but then closed it once more. A hint of bitter tension played about her lips. “Become capable of such things,” she said at last, turning her back to Saybil with a sweep of her dress. “That is what it means to stand above others.”

The three of them watched Amnir walk away, and then Hort and Kudo nearly

collapsed before rushing to surround Saybil.

“You’re amazing, Sayb! She doesn’t scare you one bit, does she?! I mean the way she carries herself is wild, it’s so overpowering! Like she’s the strongest thing in the whole world!”

“I just think she’s a good, kind person, that’s all...”

“What the hell was that she said, anyway? ‘Become capable of such things...’ What’d she mean by that? It was kinda like she was tellin’ ya to become the kinda person who ‘stands above others,’ right?! Dammit, why you always gotta make me jealous?!” Kudo tightened his grip on the kitchen knife in irritation, and made quick work of dicing the vegetables.

Hort cut the deer meat into hearty chunks, and Saybil rubbed it with herbs and spices to mask the smell, using a secret blend Mercenary had shown him.

“Hmm—? You sure it’s okay to use that, Sayb?”

“Yeah. Mercenary taught me himself,” Saybil replied, lowering his voice. “And hey, I don’t think anyone’s going to complain if it makes the meat taste a little better...”

Hort and Kudo couldn’t argue with that.

Guess they’ve gotten a taste for the finer things, thought Saybil. Hard not to become more discerning after eating Mercenary and Lily’s cooking every day back in the village.

The thing that drove the three of them to the deepest despair on their expedition wasn’t the monotonous gray of the landscape, nor the seemingly endless days of motion sickness in the carriage... It was the *terrible* food.

But they could hardly go straight to the mess sergeant, who every day filled the stomachs of over a thousand troops, and complain that what he served was

so bad it barely qualified as edible... Nevertheless, the daily assault on their taste buds was such that they would have gladly taken charge of KP on a permanent basis if it would've solved the problem.

2

“Oh hoh...? What’s this now, the victuals today are passing fair!”

Los had no need to eat, and a small taste of the food on the first day of their expedition had been enough to put her off it entirely since then. At her former students’ insistence that “today will be different,” however, she took a skeptical spoonful from the bowl that was placed in front of her, and her eyes flickered with unexpected joy.

“Right?!” Hort cried, beaming. “We were on kitchen duty today, and Sayb gave the meat a shake of Mercenary’s secret rub!”

“If a single shake is all that’s required to transform the flavor so, Mercenary should contract with the Mage Battalion to furnish them with his seasonings on a permanent basis!”

“I wonder...” mused Saybil. “Selling little bottles of this stuff could be a great source of income for the village. Maybe I’ll write to him about it.”

“Oh, that could be a great idea! Witch brand spices! *Mouthwatering meals like magi—*”

Suddenly the table they were sitting at flipped over, sending their bowls crashing to the ground. Somebody had kicked it out from under them.

“Hey! The hell you think you’re doin’?!” Kudo’s scales flushed crimson as he

leapt up from his chair.

Saybil and Hort stood, too. Hort's hand was frozen in midair, a bit of meat remaining on her spoon. Out of the corners of their eyes, Kudo and Saybil saw her quickly shove it into her mouth as the three of them turned to confront their antagonist.

Los alone continued decorously eating her meal, perched like a little bird atop the ramrod-straight Staff of Ludens.

This can't be that serious then, the three mages thought. They lowered their guards, and took another look at the man who had just overturned their table. He appeared to be male—human, in other words. The three exchanged glances, then nodded. *He's—a known quantity.*

"You're...the mess sergeant, right?"

"You put somethin' in the food, didn't you?" The man sounded furious.

Saybil blinked at him. "Not the food, exactly, but...the meat, yes. All I did was rub it with some herbs and spices to give it a little flavor, though."

"Who asked you to do that?! When the soup turns out tasting different 'n usual, makes me think somethin's contaminated it! Then I hafta throw out the whole batch!"

"Huh? But... We're already eating it, aren't we...? Didn't you taste it before you served it to the rest of the troops, Sergeant?" Saybil asked.

"The bowl I tried just happened ta be normal! But I heard from the rank and file that the soup tastes 'pernicious,' and—"

"Hast perchance misheard them stating that it tastes 'delicious'?" After draining every last drop in her bowl, Los casually interrupted the enraged mess sergeant's diatribe.

The man glared daggers at her. “I’m sayin’ that mixin’ things into the food without permission is a *problem*. You get me?”

“Quite right,” Los agreed. “’Twas imprudent of young Sayb to do so. Impolite, even. And yet—the lad could have come up with any number of tasteless, odorless poisons, so the fact that a substance so prominent it could be tasted with a single spoonful was not detected until bowls had been distributed to all and sundry suggests that the true problem lies with thy security measures! Fortunate indeed that ’twas a simple blend of herbs and spices Sayb chose to add!”

She’s right, Saybil thought. It’s not like I poisoned the stuff. But I suppose I did change the flavor of his cooking without telling him first... That can’t have felt great.

Saybil turned to look directly at the mess sergeant, who, despite his anger, was at a total loss how to respond to Los’s words. “I’m sorry. I should have checked with you before I did anything. I’m sure there’s some reason the food tastes the way it does.”

Hort clapped a hand over her mouth. “R-Right, yeah...! I mean, otherwise people would complain... This expedition to the North is special, right? So, like, *of course* the food is going to be different...”

“Can’t lay in supplies while we’re up here, either...” Kudo chimed in.

Scanning their chastened faces, the mess sergeant spat out a “Never do it again, y’hear?!” and walked off.

Los waited until he was out of earshot, then heaved a deep sigh. “My, my... I do believe there’s a certain virtue in that meek, or...tractable nature of yours... But you must needs understand, it will be to your detriment.”

“Huh? But he’s right, I was being thoughtless,” Saybil replied.

“Dost comprehend naught?! That blasted mess sergeant assuredly tasted of the soup before serving it! Yet the man noticed nothing of the altered taste—because he has been preparing your meals separately this entire time.”

“Separately?” Hort blinked in surprise. “Wait, you mean...”

Los shrugged. “’Tis harassment, I say. Harassment!”

“But...why? We didn’t do anything to him, did we?”

“Thou and thy comrades are young, Saybil, fresh from the Academy of Magic, yet handpicked for this mission by Mage Commander Amnir herself. I suspect that little man merely has a hard time swallowing such a thing.”

“Yer kiddin’ me, right?! This is the mighty Church and Mage Brigade we’re talkin’ about here—Commander Amnir’s Mage Battalion, no less! An’ they’re bullyin’ us like little kids?!”

“You are newcomers, hopping blithely into the middle of a detachment who risk their lives in venturing here—I do believe their harsh view of you is at least somewhat understandable, if not excusable. The slightest carelessness can lead to disorder, and disorder can cost lives. Not *all* such exclusivity and ostracism is evil, but, well...” Los tapped her staff against her shoulder. “There is no beauty in it.”

Saybil looked at the upturned table and the bowls scattered on the ground. They had been given no tent of their own, sleeping in the carriage every night, and the table they’d been provided was really just a simple box with a plank of wood across the top, but nothing about their treatment had made Saybil particularly suspicious.

It made sense that many of the soldiers wouldn’t be fully accepting of a trio of

newly-graduated mages who were only traveling with the Mage Battalion on Headmaster Albus's orders (or, in Kudo's case, at Commander Amnir's personal request).

Only now did Saybil realize the degree to which they had been shunned—but that alone wasn't cause for complaint.

Dinner, though—dinner was a different story.

Being ignored or ostracized was one thing, but this was an outright attack, even if it was a passive aggressive one. Not to mention that when they had tried of their own volition to improve their meals, the mess sergeant came all the way over to chew them out for it—he flipped their table, overturned their bowls, and ruined their food. As he watched the man disappear among the tents of the encampment, Saybil finally began to feel an unpleasant emotion rising up within him.

“This...kinda pisses me off.”

Hort and Kudo looked at him in shock.

Los grinned with satisfaction and slapped her knees where she sat atop her staff. “Very well, rejoice in my pardon! I have a great love of justified rage at unjust treatment! We have endured enough. And we have conceded enough. We even tried to ameliorate the situation of our own accord. Now is the time for righteous anger! Allow me to teach you youngsters the most spiteful manner for venting such wrath!”

Saybil knew what anger was—or at least, he was pretty sure he did.

During the test that marked the beginning of the special field program, when he was told that the people he cared about were hurt or worse, he had felt so angry it had been hard to contain himself.

But Los explained that becoming lost in one's emotions and attacking another person was the most primitive, childish, unsightly form of anger.

So what does beautiful anger look like?

"The secret lies in being happy. If those cretins hope to vex us, to wear us down, to make us suffer with their harassment, then we should raise our voices in laughter, be carefree, and enjoy each day as thoroughly as we can. That will irritate them most of all. As a consequence—" She paused for effect. "Tonight, the support crew of the Northern Expeditionary Force shall have a feast!"

That night.

The camp of the Mage Battalion was lit with balls of Solm in place of torches. The support crew were normally scattered throughout, but tonight they were gathered around Saybil, Hort, and Kudo's carriage at Los's behest. The reason was simple—she knew they were being harassed in much the same way as her former students, which meant the abuse directed at Saybil and the others was likely just an extension of the treatment of the support crew.

The food they had all been provided was as inedible as ever, but that could be remedied with a few adjustments. Los dumped it all into the Staff of Ludens—now the Cooking Pot of Ludens—then returned it to everyone's bowls once it had been properly seasoned.

At lunch that day, the food they'd been served had made each and every one of the support crew's eyes light up. Something was different. Their entire lives

they had only ever eaten to fill their stomachs, but now, for the first time, something tasted so good that they were almost reluctant to swallow.

This must be some kind of mistake, they thought—perhaps some meal meant for the Battalion’s upper echelons had been switched with theirs by accident. The support crew were always driven out of the tents at mealtimes, but that night, they were invited to dine with that trio of greenhorn mages who had joined their unit for the expedition north. They were also aware that the three newcomers were getting stuck with the same meals as themselves.

“Man, who woulda thunk a teeny bit o’ powder could change the flavor so much!”

“What the hell they been feeding us up ’til now, anyway?”

The twenty-five members of the support crew sat enjoying their much-improved soup with shining eyes—though some soon began to hesitate over each spoonful as the realization came: “Now I know soup can taste like this, how’m I gonna handle lunch tomorrow...? I never paid much mind ta good food, but now I jus’ *know* I’ll want more.”

“Why so faint of heart? Thy wish to eat delicious food is eminently human! ’Tis such desire drives mankind to action! Advise your superiors that improving the taste of the meals, even just a smidge, will surely improve morale on even the most perilous of journeys! That sentiment may just nudge things in the right direction.”

“But we couldn’t!” One of the support crew frantically refuted Los’s suggestion. “‘Advise our superiors’...? If they threw us outta the unit this far north, we’d be dead in a heartbeat! We would never dare offend anyone from the Mage Battalion...”

Others raised their voices in agreement.

“It’s a miracle we get ta eat like this tonight. Our job is to do the stuff anyone can do, but nobody wants to... That’s all we’re good for, see? The Battalion’s allowin’ us to be here—and it’s the Goddess picks the food we get to eat. We might all be dead tomorrow for wolfin’ down grub as good as this.”

Merry laughter erupted from the rest of the crew, and Saybil looked down at the bowl in his hands. He stood up, and started to walk away.

“Sayb? Where are you going?” asked Hort.

“To *advise* them.”

“Huh?!”

The laughter died and the support crew all turned to look at Saybil.

“Hey now, don’t do that! We don’t need you interferin’! We’re just fine with things the way they are!”

“That’s right! Now c’mon, sit down, will ya?”

Faces pale, the support crew frantically tried to stop Saybil from going. The unpleasant feeling of aggravation inside Saybil only grew stronger with each desperate face he looked upon.

“Let’s talk this through.”

Saybil looked out over the members of the support crew. They were all different ages, genders, shapes and sizes...and all of them were staring nervously at him.

“Let’s say I go to Commander Amnir and ask for this childish bullying with the food to stop, and she ends up throwing all of you out of the Battalion as a result... Could you really have trusted someone like that with your lives in the

first place?”

“...Huh? W-Well...”

“If she’s willing to throw you out over a little complaint, especially up here in the North where that would clearly mean death for all of you... Would she really protect you in case of something like a demon attack?”

“That’s why we’ve gotta stay quiet and obey! So she *will* protect us...!”

“We should say something!” said Hort, jumping to her feet.

Kudo remained silent, but dragged himself to his feet with an irritated look on his face.

“It’s not like I’d be asking her to make things any more difficult or giving anyone more work to do. I just want to say that from now on, they can skip the hassle of bullying us and give us the same food as the rest of the troops. Either that, or they can just give us the ingredients and we’ll cook our own meals. If Commander Amnir refuses that request—and if her reason is that giving the worst food to the support crew helps her lead by establishing a hierarchy within the unit, well...”

Saybil paused for the space of a breath.

“Then I don’t think this Battalion’s the right place for us.”

It was the kind of line that normally would have gotten him laughed out of the room, told not to get above himself... But there was something about Saybil’s quiet tone that made his words more than intimidating enough to silence the timid members of the support crew. Noticing the suddenly icy atmosphere, Saybil smooshed his face with his hands, struggling to soften his expression. The smile he managed in the end was clumsy at best... But he persisted, addressing his anxious audience in the calmest tone he could manage.

“Please don’t worry. If we end up leaving the Battalion, and you all get thrown out as a result, we’ll all head back to the Kingdom of Wenias together.”

“Huhhh? When’d you get so self-assured, Sayb?! Can we really protect these people?!” asked Hort. “Anyway, it’d be, like, a *big* problem for the support crew if they all got fired, wouldn’t it?”

“Oh, I guess so, huh. Hmm... I suppose we could offer to give the Battalion a bunch of magic potions in exchange for keeping them on...”

“What, so those things’re just trump cards you get to use over an’ over again, now? That ain’t fair.”

“Making them is the only talent I have at the moment, so I figure I might as well use it when I have the chance.”

“But Sayb, couldn’t they just, like, take all your potions and not keep their end of the bargain?”

“We could ask them to sign a contract...”

“Hell, the Mage Battalion might just execute us for bein’ troublemakers!”

“I see what you’re saying... Direct negotiations could be life or death, huh.”

Nobody jumped in to deny it... But Hort and Kudo were participating in the discussion on the assumption that leaving the Battalion along with Saybil—and risking their lives to do it—was on the table. Saybil, for his part, clearly accepted it without question. Hort and Kudo stood by his side of their own volition, which he knew by now was an indication that their minds were made up.

“Very well! Rejoice in my pardon!” shouted Los cheerfully, banging her cup down on the table. “I have a great love for chivalrous hearts burning with righteous indignation. To be frank, I had hoped thou wouldst prick at them somewhat more and make a bit of sport for me to enjoy, but I see that what

thou seekest is not revenge, Sayb, but betterment. I love the sight of the cat tormenting the mouse, 'tis true, but equally do I adore the jaws of the wolf as they clamp down upon its prey. Leave, and I will follow suit. Little Ludens and I shall protect you and any you have in turn chosen to protect.”

“Huh?! But you’ve wanted to go to the Forbidden Library, like, forever, haven’t you, Professor Los...?!”

“I was simply catching a ride in this carriage since it was proffered to me. I could journey to the Library any time I wish.”

“I love you, Professor Los!”

There were tears in Hort’s eyes as she squeezed the ancient witch with all her might.

4

“You made an improvement to the food? And this caused the mess sergeant to overturn your table at lunch?”

Despite their poor manners in calling on Amnir during a meal, she calmly welcomed Saybil and the others into her tent, and was duly stunned when they delivered their complaint.

She turned her head to the knight who stood beside her. He appeared to be on horseback even there inside her tent—but the light of Solm revealed him to be neither man nor horse. Where the neck of the horse should be, there instead sprouted a human torso and head... Or one might say that from the waist down, the human body was replaced by that of a horse... But however one chose to view it, from the waist up he was a young, soft-spoken man who appeared

perfectly human—save for the four incontrovertibly equine legs kicking against the ground beneath him. The human torso rising from the horse’s body gave him the appearance of a knight on horseback, looking down on those around him from an imposing position, and the peculiarity of it all made most who came face to face with him shrink back a little.

“Raul. Report.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” the equine beastfallen, Raul, answered without hesitation. “At present, the Mage Battalion provides three different varieties of meal according to station. First, there is the food reserved for those in important roles within the Battalion—like what you’re partaking of now, Highness. Then there are the meals prepared for the rank and file, and lastly, those for the support crew. The recipes and ingredients are all completely different, but this separation is to keep us from being completely wiped out by something in the food. The seasoning and whatnot is delegated entirely to the mess sergeant.”

“Then the improvement you seek is for...”

Amnir looked at Saybil, who rushed to finish the sentence.

“The food given to the support crew. It tastes terrible, and when we tried to fix the problem on our own we were told not to interfere.”

Amnir nodded. “Raul.”

“Your Highness.” Raul placed a bowl on the table before her. It was the same food Saybil and the others had been eating each day.

Amnir took a spoonful, and grimaced. “You can’t be serious! When did the Battalion’s purse become so light...?!” The commander went pale, and began to tremble.

“Oh, it’s not a budgetary issue,” Raul put in nonchalantly. “This is simple bullying, Highness.”

Saybil and the others were shocked. *Raul knew? About the bullying?*

Amnir, however, seemed to have been unaware, and looked dubiously up at the beastfallen. “What do you mean, ‘bullying’?”

“On our last expedition, one of the support crew decided to play a prank, and lured a monster into camp. Ten of our number died fighting it. One of the casualties was the younger brother of our present mess sergeant,” Raul replied.

“And so he is deliberately serving them this disgusting food?”

“The member of the support crew who caused the incident is gone, as it happens, but the bullying continues.”

“Why have you not reprimanded him for this?”

“Because I’ve received no complaints on the matter.”

“Well, now you have.”

“And the situation must be redressed. The mess sergeant has been with our unit for a considerable time, though, and he’s popular around camp. He’s also a capable warrior. If we’re careless in reprimanding him, it could sow unnecessary discord among the ranks.”

“Why not make a blood offering of him as a message to the others, and avoid the risk of dissent altogether?” Amnir suggested.

“You *are* joking, Highness?”

“But of course.” Amnir cleared her throat, and glanced at Saybil. “Let us proceed as follows. Raul, inform the mess sergeant that because of the expansion of the Battalion, I will personally choose one of the three options he

cooks each day as a precaution against the concomitant increase in the danger of assassination.”

“As you wish.”

“During his daily preparation, he will be forced to consider the possibility that I might choose the support crew’s meal. To avoid impropriety, and to minimize the risk of assassination, you will of course continue to bring me my meals, Raul.”

“Of course.”

“Do you have anything to add?”

“No, Highness.”

“What about you three? Is there anything else you would like to say while you’re here?”

Hort raised her hand at once.

“You may speak,” said Amnir.

“I *would* like the mess sergeant to apologize for flipping over our table! Also, I don’t really feel it’s right that he gets off scot-free after bullying the support crew all this time!”

“Most reasonable. Resorting to violence out of anger could upset the discipline and order of the entire Battalion... I am extremely displeased by such vigilantism—Raul.”

“Shall we make a blood offering of him as a message to the others?” Raul turned his placid smile to Hort.

“You’re joking, right...?” Hort ventured, blinking nervously.

Raul’s smile only widened.

Saybil thought for a moment, then opened his mouth to speak. “Ahem... To be honest, I don’t think it really matters.”

Everyone looked at him, unable to divine his meaning.

It’s just such a pain. All of it... Being apologized to, accepting those apologies—the whole charade. “If this all started with the death of his little brother, I don’t think anything we can say will make him trust the support crew again. We gain nothing from an empty apology, and forcing him to say sorry would probably just make him hate them even more. And that’s what the support crew are most afraid of.”

“But Sayb...!” Hort broke in.

“So listen,” he continued. “I just want to leave it all alone. We’ll prepare all our own food while we’re on this expedition. Please ask the mess sergeant to share an appropriate portion of his ingredients with us—including the seasonings he’s never once used in the support crew’s food. That should force him to rethink the menu and change the flavor of things, since he probably doesn’t even include the support crew in his calculations when he’s procuring provisions. If you could get him to agree to that, Commander, it would be way better than some superficial apology.”

“Hm.” Amnir leaned back in her chair and gazed at Saybil. “So you would rather pursue your own benefit than inflict loss on another, and if it negatively impacts them in the process, that itself is more than sufficient punishment—do I understand you aright?”

“That’s what I think, yes. Does that work for you, Hort?”

“Y...Yeah, d-dodally...! You’re zo gool, Zayb...!”

“Huh?! Why are you crying?!”

“Because! I waz being z-zuch a baby!”

“What else is new?”

“Shut up, Kudo! You’ve been so nervous this whole time you haven’t even said a word!”

“*You* shut up! How can you say that in front of the commander?!”

Amid the clamor in her tent, Amnir resumed her meal. Los quietly crept over and set her chin on the table, then grinned up at the imposing commander.

“...What is it?”

“My little fledglings are outstanding individuals, dost thou not agree?”

“I do. They have done their utmost in addressing this matter, and I in turn will do the same.”

“Thy burden is a heavy one, Mage Commander.”

“But no more than I can bear,” Amnir said primly, taking the bowl of unimproved support crew soup in both hands and draining every last drop.

5

“You’re popular no matter where you go, huh, Professor!”

It was day eleven of the expedition, and the fourth since the road they’d been traveling along petered out, leaving them to pick their way overland.

To make matters worse, the ash that had begun falling from the sky the day before made them unable to breathe properly without covering their noses and mouths.

Their final destination was Niedora Fort—the Forbidden Library.

The Library continually sought out books that had been banned by the Church, and as a result its location had been wiped from any and all maps. The roads leading there were left to fall into ruin, and only those who knew where to look were capable of finding it. Nevertheless, it had survived—even through the Disasters of the North.

The Forbidden Library was in fact now known as the General Library, and all manner of knowledge seekers dreamt of gaining access to the information contained therein...though where it was situated made that somewhat difficult. Most normal people had no hope of reaching the Library, so it was still more or less a “den of witches,” at least according to Headmaster Albus. The Mage Battalion had also made it their base of operations for peace-keeping missions and surveys of the North.

“Everyone was calling you ‘The Witch of the Staff’ and ‘Loux Krystas’ at first, but now I feel like half of ‘em are calling you ‘Professor Los.’”

“I *do* endeavor to attract such popularity, after all. If one wishes to belong, one must create that space for oneself. All the more so outcasts such as we!”

“It’s all an act, then?”

“Indeed. We are all playing the parts we have chosen in this life...and forever changing our roles to suit those with whom we find ourselves sharing a stage.”

“Then what are you *really* like, Professor?”

“Quite the philosophical question, young Hort! Tell me first, what is *anyone* really like? When do we see their true selves?”

“Well, when they aren’t just keeping up appearances... When they’re all relaxed and free and natural... I guess?”

“Thou describest a newborn babe!”

“Oh, you might be right! Babies are always totally real and natural!”

“But even they display different attitudes when faced with different people. Meanwhile, some folk are brutal and bloodthirsty in their attacks upon the weak, and yet infinitely kind toward their own flesh and blood. Which wouldst thou call their true nature, I wonder?”

“Both of ‘em, obviously. Same deal with food. Just ‘cos I say I like sweet stuff, it don’t mean I don’t like spicy food, too,” Kudo put in, as if he couldn’t believe he even had to explain it.

“Indeed, yes,” nodded Los with satisfaction. “Thou canst not look at but one facet of a person and hope to comprehend them in full. Even one’s own children are a constant source of bafflement.”

Saybil looked at Los, stunned. “You’ve never borne children...have you, Professor Los...?”

“No, though I have taken in and raised them.”

“Huh?! You mean you adopted them?! Adopt me, too!”

“Thou canst live perfectly well on thine own, Hort. The babes I took in had lost their parents, and would have weakened and died without me... Though most have passed on by now.” Los squinted, a hint of sadness in her eyes.

“You said ‘most’... So, some of them are still alive?”

“They were raised by a witch, after all. Some became apprentices to acquaintances of mine, or made their way into witches’ circles... Others engaged in their own independent research on the subject of sorcery and became sorcerers in their own right.”

“Wow... I mean, you *have* been alive for three hundred years, I guess. We still barely know anything about you, Professor Los... I don't like it!” Hort pouted.

Saybil felt a little unsettled, too. She was always calling them her little ducklings, but she'd had others in the past... Children she had raised as her own. He wondered if those children had been more important to her than they were...

“Oh, but I guess I'm glad I wasn't one of your children, Professor Los!” he said with sudden realization, looking down at Los as she walked beside him. “I mean, kids can't marry their parents!”

“Oh! It's coming into view, my little ducklings! There lies the Forbidden Library!” Deciding to ignore Saybil's comment, Los pressed onward at speed.

Kudo tapped Saybil on the shoulder. “Look, man. You two may not be related, but that don't mean you're gettin' married anytime soon either, hear me?”

His look was one of pity, but Saybil brushed his hand away. “I know that. But better there's a small chance than none at all.” He quickened his pace to catch up with Los

“That dumbass doesn't give up, huh.”

“Nope... There's a rough road ahead...” agreed Hort.

Before they knew it, the party was standing in front of a bizarre gate made of human bones.

“Are those...real?” asked Hort, turning pale.

Kudo nodded. “Made from the bones of people who died in the Disasters of the North. The chief librarian of the Forbidden Library made it himself.”

“He must be totally unhinged!”

“Well, from what I hear he isn’t exactly human to begin with.”

Hort stared at Saybil in disbelief.

“It was in the introduction to the book he wrote: ‘I am the Thousand-Eyed Sentinel of Ten Thousand Leagues, one of those humankind calls demons.’”

They passed through the gate of human bones, said to be “culled from the nightmares of a deranged artist,” and into the grounds of the Forbidden Library.

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To their surprise, on the other side of the gate, they found a town laid out before them. Once they were through, the soldiers of the Mage Battalion appeared to need no instruction, spreading out and attending to their various tasks in a smooth flow. Saybil, Hort, and Kudo, unsure of who to follow, were left standing just inside the gate. They could have asked Amnir, of course, but as she had been at the front of the column while the three of them were somewhere in the middle, she was long gone by the time they made it inside.

“Umm, what now...?”

“I mean, our job came straight from the headmaster—it ain’t like we actually *joined* the Mage Battalion or anythin’, so...”

“Huh?! Like, we’re free to do whatever we want now?!”

“Right... I wonder if there are any inns or anything...” Saybil took the chief librarian’s book from his bag and flipped through the pages until he found a rough map—which unfortunately lacked anything like a guide to the town’s

amenities. *If Los were here, she'd find us somewhere to post up in no time—*

“Huh? Come to think of it, where’s Professor Los?” Saybil wondered aloud, looking around for her.

Hort shrugged. “She just screamed, ‘The Forbidden Library!’ and went running off in *that* direction.”

At the far end of a street lined with little houses there stood an oddly-shaped tower, which looked as if someone had made it by carelessly stacking boxes one atop the other. The boxes got smaller and smaller as the tower climbed into the sky, and there were clouds of smoke puffing out of the very top.

“That’s the Forbidden Library?”

“So *that’s* where the ash is coming from.”

Just then—

“Excuse me, do you have a moment?”

—they were suddenly interrupted by an unfamiliar voice. The trio turned to see who had addressed them.

“Gah!”

It was immediately obvious to Saybil and Kudo that Hort’s “Gah!” was an expression of disgust rather than surprise.

“A ‘Gah!’ like that could really hurt an old man’s feelings, little lady,” said the stranger, who had evidently realized this as well.

While Hort’s reaction had been rude to say the least, the forty-something fellow standing before them pitifully stroking the stubble on his chin was so inexcusably unkempt and generally suspect that they couldn’t help but feel wary of letting their guard down around him.

“...He looks like he kills random passersby just for fun.”

“That’s way ruder than what I said, Sayb!”

“Ah, sorry. I didn’t mean it as an insult...”

“Don’t apologize to me, apologize to him!”

At Hort’s prompting, Saybil took a closer look at the man.

He appeared tall and thin at first glance, but had strong muscles in his shoulders and arms, and at least three knives on his person that Saybil could see. The man was also completely silent. The sounds he should by rights have made just by moving around were almost entirely muted—his footsteps, the rustle of his clothes, even his breathing was incredibly quiet. The lack of sound was so out of keeping with his crude and slovenly appearance that it gave him something of an unsettling air.

Sensing Saybil’s eyes upon him, the man grinned. He seemed to be waiting for an apology, but when Saybil went to give him one—

“Don’t worry about it. You’re not wrong.”

The voice was so close, Saybil jumped back in surprise—it took him a moment to realize that the man had just whispered in his ear.

Hort and Kudo leapt in front of Saybil to protect him.

“Waaah! You pervert! Sayb, he just tried to lick your ear! This creep must be into licking young boys’ ears!”

“Shit, I got careless...! Figured he’d go after Hort, not Saybil...!”

“W-W-W-Wait a minute, calm down! I juuust wanted to let him in on a little secret... I wasn’t trying to lick his ear or anything...”

“What kind of ‘little secret’ does a weird old guy have to tell a boy he’s only

just met?!”

“Ack, I’m not gettin’ out of this no matter what I say, huh... Boss!” The man turned to look behind him. “Can you explain to these kids what’s going on? I give up!”

At this, a figure stepped out of the shadows. It was a young boy, with white hair and red eyes. He turned his glare on the middle-aged man, who retreated immediately, then said soberly, “Those whom this man chooses to pair with are all voluptuous...and female.”

“Boss?! What does that have to do with anything?!”

“You requested that I explain your lack of sexual motive in bringing your lips so close to that young man’s ear. And so I did.”

“Ah, right, right. Ehm, that’s my bad, I should’ve been more clear... I wanted you to tell them that I’m a servant of the chief librarian, not just some suspicious old geezer...!”

“The fact that you are a servant of the chief librarian does not preclude you from chasing the tails of our guests.”

“I can’t argue with that...!” the man wailed, holding his head in his hands.

Saybil ran a hand over the book he’d taken from his bag and looked closely at the white-haired boy. “The Thousand-Eyed Sentinel of Ten Thousand Leagues...?”

The young boy looked over at Saybil by way of reply.

“Are you the chief librarian of the Forbidden Library?” Saybil asked.

“Kin of Mud-Black, Son of Thirteen, Student of Mooncaller, Fledgling of the Dawn Witch—there are far too many titles by which one could address you.”

Saybil gave a start. *Son of Thirteen—only a very few people know that.* “So it’s true, then. The chief librarian of the Forbidden Library’s eyes can see through anything.”

“There are some things I cannot see.”

“Wait a sec... Sorry, I’m having a little trouble keeping up here... This kid is the chief librarian? But he just looks like a regular—”

Hort’s doubts were cut short by a single glance from the boy.

“You don’t see it, then?”

“Huh?”

“You don’t see me as a demon?”

“Umm... No, you just look like a regular human kid...”

The chief librarian smiled at Hort’s reply. He looked so happy he could barely contain himself, yet there was something inhuman in the grin.

“Here you are at last, Ducklings of the Dawn. I, *at the very least*, welcome you with open arms.”



Chapter Two



–I, at the very least, welcome you with open arms.

The meaning behind those words soon became obvious to Saybil and the others. As they followed the chief librarian and his servant—who introduced himself as Barthel—into the book-packed interior of the Forbidden Library, they were immediately met with piercing, curious stares from all directions.

Then the whispering started, right on cue.

–Those are the graduates from the Academy of Magic.

–The ones who trained in Mud-Black’s village?

–So one of them really *is* a beastfallen.

–Look at those arrogant little...

“Is it just me, or does it seem like everyone has a really bad impression of us?” Hort murmured.

“I mean, these witches and sorcerers have trained for decades, and we learned our magic in just a few years at school,” Saybil replied. “You never considered how they might feel about us?”

“I guess I figured they might, like, make a big fuss over us?”

“Those antlers suckin’ up all the nutrients so nothing reaches your brain? Get

a grip, Little Miss Honors Student,” spat Kudo.

Hort pouted at him. Having spent so much time at the bottom of the class, Saybil was used to such comments, but for Hort—the best student in the Academy’s short history—it was clearly a different story.

“The Mage Battalion didn’t seem to love us either,” Saybil mused. “I guess that’s just how it goes.”

“But Commander Amnir handpicked you to accompany the Mage Battalion, didn’t she, Kudo?” Hort persisted. “How come they were still so mean to *you*?”

“Wanted to see what I was made of, I s’pose. Didn’t get much of a chance to show ’em, though.”

“Aaah! I just wanna thump them! Like, really kick their butts!” cried Hort, clenching her fists and giving the air a swift punch.

Saybil wasn’t surprised—he’d more or less expected the treatment they were receiving. And for all her complaints, Hort had also had her suspicions... But that didn’t mean she was going to shuffle her way meekly through the halls. She strolled along with her head held high, displaying her defiance by cracking jokes to Kudo loud enough for all the whisperers to hear.

Barthel watched the two of them out of the corner of his eye and smiled wryly. “You’re all quite bold.”

“Well, we’re pretty used to this stuff by now,” Saybil answered lightly.

Be it their attempted murder at the hands of the Tyrant or the near-destruction of Zero’s village by an anti-witch army, they had all experienced persecution on a fairly large scale.

“It’s true,” Hort snickered. “All they’re doing is whispering! Assuming they don’t jump out and attack us, this is a walk in the park!”

“What, I’m s’posed ta flinch, when these chickenshits are too scared to even pick a fight with us? I got more balls than that.”

As Kudo let fly with another of his signature insults, Saybil looked at his friend’s nether regions with a sudden scientific interest in beastfallen biology.

“Come to think of it, you don’t actually have balls, do you, Kudo...?”

“That’s not the point and anyway ’course I do wanna see ’em asshole?!”

Kudo punched Saybil in the shoulder.

“Ouch!” Saybil clutched his arm—as expressionless as ever.

“Ahahahah!” Barthel chortled. “Such chummy classmates. Even I’m having fun!”

“Oh, sorry...!” Hort rushed to apologize. “I forgot, this is a library, huh... We’re being too noisy, aren’t we?”

“Not at all,” the unkempt man replied. “To be honest, I was a bit worried about you coming here. When I heard Headmaster Albus was sending three graduates, I thought it might be too soon. As you can see, the witches and sorcerers here aren’t exactly the most accepting types.”

“But you said *you* were glad we’re here, right, Chief Librarian?” Saybil asked.

The librarian nodded. “I like interesting things. I have a love of everything that’s special, rare, or unique in this world. The life you will come to lead over the next few centuries will surpass everything in this library, I expect.”

“Reaaally? Even more interesting than *my* life?”

Saybil was still reeling, unsure how to respond to the chief librarian’s comment, when a shrill, high-pitched voice overwhelmed him. He looked to see a girl walking toward them in a dress so extravagant she might easily have been

mistaken for the daughter of some noble house, altogether out of place in the Forbidden Library of the North.

The click of her heels echoed through the Library as she approached. She didn't seem friendly—that much was unmistakable. It was as if the reserved whispering all around them had suddenly taken shape and jumped out at them.

“Oh, so we're done whispering, are we?” said Hort, meeting her hostility head-on.

The girl—Ulula by name—seemed completely unfazed. Quite the contrary: she regarded Hort with a haughty expression, her words equally bristling. “I was never whispering to begin with...? You seem to have mistaken me for someone else. Or have you simply chosen to lump me in with the hoi polloi? And what could I possibly have to say about lowly little fleas like you in the first place? Have the decency to know your place.”

And so it began—it was unclear what, but *something* was going to happen. A tension filled the Library, as intense as if they'd just encountered a ferocious beast in a dead end alley.

“In any case, I was addressing the chief librarian. What undisciplined little fledglings you are, to stick your beaks into other people's conversations. What kind of teacher would produce such as you, I wonder!”

“Hmmm? Now there's a shocker! It's only been ten seconds and you've already forgotten your own behavior! Who was it that barged into *our* conversation, again...?”

“Oh, you can't be serious. You simply *must* be joking! You can't possibly consider yourself my equal? Have those wretched overgrown antlers of yours sucked all the nutrients away from your brain? Or no, I see your breasts have

taken them all instead! Kahahahahaha!”

Ulula’s mocking laughter struck a nerve with Saybil. He went to step forward, but Hort stopped him with an outstretched arm. “Sayb. This is my fight.”

But: “Don’t get ahead of yourself,” Kudo said. “It’s *our* fight.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Saybil added.

Both of them ignored Hort’s attempts to stop them, and moved up to stand by her side.

His friend had been insulted. It made Saybil personally angry—and that anger wasn’t something he could brush off. The two sides only managed a few seconds of glaring, however, before a great *clap* echoed through the air.

“That’s enough! Quiet now. No fighting in the Forbidden Library.” Barthel had interposed himself between Ulula and the three newcomers.

Ulula looked at him with naked scorn in her eyes. “Ugh, I simply *can’t*... Every time I see you, you’re such a slovenly mess! Learn from Father’s example, won’t you? I feel as if I’m getting mucky just looking at you!”

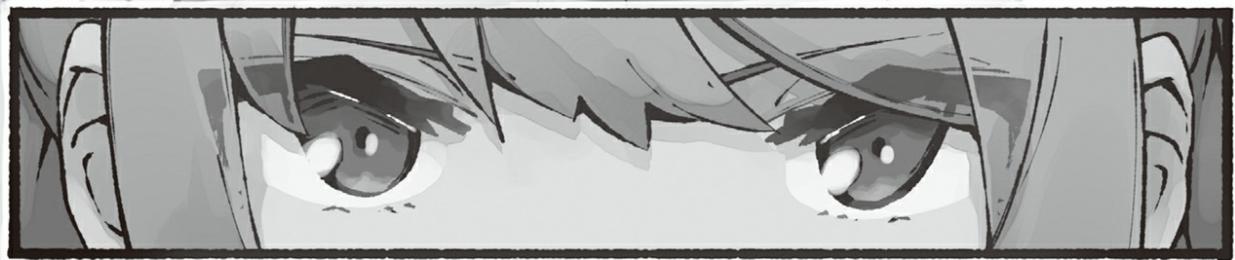
“That’s good,” replied Barthel. “Get dirty once, and you’ll find it’s so easy, you’ll never want to go back to being clean. Please, step into my world, Miss Ulula.”

“Unbearable! Chief Librarian! Won’t you at least make your servants presentable?! I cannot stand it any longer! I’m taking a bath! Come, Kukuru!”

“W-Wait, Ulula...”

It was only then that Saybil finally noticed the presence of another girl standing just behind her loud companion. She was dressed up in clothes just as brilliant and gaudy as Ulula’s, but somehow she barely attracted a glance. All

the attention seemed to flow in Ulula's direction, that was part of it—and it was clear from their momentary exchange who held the power in their relationship. Ulula turned and strode away, the girl she'd addressed as Kukurū scurrying along behind.



Saybil and the others stood in shocked silence in the wake of their departure.

Hort was the first to give vent to her anger. “Who the heck was that?! Huh?! And what did she mean about my antlers and my boobs?!”

“I think you’ve got the coolest antlers in the world, Hort,” Saybil said enthusiastically. “And your breasts are great, too. They’re so big.”

“Dumbass! You know you can’t say shit like that, right?!”

“It’s okay, Kudo! It’s okay to say that right now! That is, I want you to! Compliment me more!”

“You sure?! I mean, yeah, I’ve always thought they were somethin’ else, but...!”

“Right?! My antlers and my body are amazing! How could she try and make fun of me like that? It doesn’t make any sense!”

“It’s true... Those are quite the impressive protrusions.”

Hort had been driven into a self-affirming frenzy by Saybil and Kudo’s praise, but Barthel’s comment brought her crashing back to her senses.

Barthel flinched, realizing what had just slipped out. “Your antlers, I mean! I was talking about your antlers!! I might not look it, but I’m a bowman, you see... I used to go deer hunting all the time, and even now the sight of a fine pair of antlers gets me all excited...”

“Excited?! First it was Sayb’s ears, now it’s my antlers?!”

“Ahahahah.”

“At least deny it!!”

“Well, getting a good, long look at your antlers can wait ’til later, I suppose...”

First let me show you to your rooms. I see the ash has gotten all over you, so why not take a bath and refresh yourselves before deciding on your next course of action?"

Fishy smile still plastered on his face, Barthel led them on through the Library. The chief librarian, perhaps having sensed that his role in confirming Barthel's position was complete, had disappeared before anyone realized he was gone.

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The three of them were given their own separate guest rooms within the Library.

"I was sure we'd be staying at some inn in town," said Saybil, looking quizzically around at their accommodations.

"Haven't you noticed?" Barthel chuckled.

"Noticed what?"

"That you're getting special treatment here at the Forbidden Library. The three of you trained at the village of the Mud-Black Witch, managed a bloodless victory over those Church conspirators, and were personally sent here by the headmaster of the Academy of Magic. To top it all off, the chief librarian's taken a shine to you. The other magic-users don't seem too thrilled with your presence here, of course... Hence that little encounter with Ulula."

"Meaning they...envy us?"

"To be frank, yes."

Saybil let slip an "Ahaa." He had anticipated people looking down their noses

at him and his friends, telling them not to get too big for their britches just because they had graduated from the Academy of Magic... But he hadn't bargained for anyone envying them for receiving special treatment at the Library.

"Remember when I stopped you from fighting earlier?"

"Yes... Of course."

"I was only able to intervene because that was an impromptu argument. If it'd been a duel, I couldn't have prevented it."

"A duel?" asked Saybil.

"See, witches and sorcerers don't know the first thing about resolving their differences with talk. They tend to duke it out and then decide that whoever's left standing is stronger and better—and, most importantly, right."

"What?! That makes them sound like a bunch of muscle-brained meatheads!"

Barthel nodded. "They don't have much interest in understanding each other to begin with. Indifference, hostility, or subordination—that's basically all you get with them. I didn't know too much about these folk before I came here to serve under the chief librarian myself. Spend some time here, though, and you come to understand all too well: it's no surprise that these are the ones who butted heads with the Church five hundred years ago."

Saybil blinked in surprise, and after running his eyes over Barthel once more, he came to a realization. "You...used to be a member of the Knights of the Church, didn't you?"

"Mighty observant of you."

"But then what are you doing here, serving under a demon?"

“Just kind of happened, I suppose. I do like the chief librarian, though, don’t get me wrong. I’m grateful to Zero as well, and the headmaster of the Academy of Magic sure is cute. But just ‘cos *some* witches are good eggs don’t mean *all* of ‘em are. The chief librarian and I have been tasked with protecting you three from the rotten ones.”

“Which is why you’re putting us up in the Library?”

“The chief librarian can see everywhere in the world—you could go to the edge of the map and off it, and he could still find you. But that doesn’t really matter if nobody’s close enough to help when the danger comes, does it?”

“Uhm... Thank you very much?”

“Ahahah! Sensible one, ain’tcha. Just do me this one favor—promise you won’t agree to any duels. I mean it. Once you’ve agreed to a death match with someone, there’s nothing either the chief librarian or I can do to stop it.”

But.

The very next day.

Saybil, Hort, and Kudo stood facing Ulula and Kukuru in the great hall of the Forbidden Library. And:

“I accept your challenge.”

Barthel’s warning had been in vain.

When he woke up that morning, Saybil naturally had no intention whatsoever of disobeying Barthel's instructions. He was far more focused on all the books he would soon be reading from the Forbidden Library's collection. He finished his morning preparations and headed out into the hallway, only to find Hort and Kudo leaving their rooms at just the same moment. The three of them had spent so much time together at this point that such things tended to happen without the need for prior arrangement.

"Ugh, I'm so hungry... Breakfast is in the great hall or something, right?"

"Yep, that's what Barthel said."

"Man, out here at the end of the freakin' world, just some bread and fruit would be plenty."

Chatting away, the trio arrived at the great hall to find a line of servants waiting to provide their guests with a hot breakfast. They stood and stared in wonder, but the spell was broken by a distinctive "Here!" from somewhere behind them. When they turned to look, Los was standing there waving at them.

"Why do you simply stand there? Come, retrieve your breakfasts and sit!"

"You mean, we're allowed to eat this, too...?" Saybil asked.

"The chief librarian delights in entertaining his guests. I can personally vouch for the quality of the food." Puffing out her chest with some kind of misplaced pride, Los took a tray from one of the servers and elegantly seated herself at one of the long tables nearby.

Saybil and the others did the same.

"Whoaaa! Eggs, smoked sausage, white bread, *and* vegetable soup?! There

are even pastries for dessert!” Hort’s eyes were positively gleaming—and there was enough food for two piled on her plate.

“Yer really eatin’ *all* that first thing in the morning...?”

“Heh heh heh, my antlers suck up all the nutrients.”

“Ain’t it just all the *extra* that goes up there?”

Hort’s antlers had developed considerably in the course of their expedition northward, each one branching into two sharp tips. They didn’t quite look heavy just yet, but it did seem like their shape would make getting dressed something of a challenge.

“I wonder how big they’re going to get.”

“I’m not really sure, but I don’t think I want them any longer than this. It’s kind of a pain for sleeping.”

“Ah, that’s too bad.”

“Huh? Th-Then maybe I’ll grow them out a bit more! Anyway, let’s dig in!” Hort smiled and happily took a bite of her breakfast roll.

“Where did you sleep last night, Professor Los?”

“I did no such thing—I conversed with the chief librarian until morning. He has quite a taste for the stories I tell.”

“You know the chief librarian?!”

“I have not lived three hundred years for nothing! Little Ludens also knows him quite well... Isn’t that so, Ludens?” Los smiled at her staff, and Ludens’s black orb bounced as if nodding in agreement.

“Makes sense. The chief librarian *is* a demon, too, after all...”

“But, like, he’s got the power to see whatever he wants, right? What does he need to ask you about your travels for, Professor Los?”

“He can see, but he cannot hear. Nor can he see through witches’ barriers or within the precincts of the Church.”

“Oh! Now I get it!”

“Most importantly, the chief librarian has a great fondness for storytelling, for the emotions behind the actions and words of others. Thus it is that he collects books of the tales he so enjoys.”

“Oh, that reminds me! Listen to this, Professor! Yesterday the chief librarian said this super amazing thing to Sayb. He said that Sayb’s life would, like, beat out all the books in the Forbidden Library. And then, after that...!”

As Hort recounted the events of the previous day, Los sighed with exasperation. “Some of the witches here are so childish toward you newborn magelings.”

“I don’t know about childish—I mean, she looked younger than me...”

“So does Professor Los, birdbrain.”

“Oh, right... Wait, then that little girl from yesterday might’ve been an old woman...? Like, on the inside, I mean?”

Speak of the devil, as they say—for no sooner had Hort brought up the topic of Ulula, than...

“How rude! I am but twenty-five years of age!”

With a great clatter, Ulula slammed her plate down onto the table.

Startled, Saybil looked up and saw that she was trembling with rage and glaring right at Hort.

“Eavesdropping, huh?” Hort said reprovably.

Ulula raised an eyebrow. “When you talk so loud in a hall as quiet as this, it should be obvious that *everyone* can hear—it’s as if you’re putting on some kind of a show! Or are you so self-absorbed that you need such things explained to you?”

Saybil turned to Hort. “How old are you, again?”

“I’m seventeen! Wait, you didn’t know that?!”

“Sorry... So that means you’re eight years older than her, Ulula.”

“I suppose so?” Ulula replied, perplexed. “What of it? Does being older than an infant automatically make me an old woman? You three are such halfwits, I can scarcely stand it!”

“Then don’t sit with us...” Kudo muttered wearily, earning an irritated glare from the young witch across the table.

“I decide where I eat breakfast! Stop dillydallying, Kukurū, and come sit!”

“S-Sorry, Ulula!”

Kukurū hurriedly sat down by Ulula’s side, and an owl flew down to perch on her head, letting out a series of low hoots. There was something strange about the bird... For one thing, it had a purple ribbon tied around its neck. Kukurū tore off a piece of bread and held it up for the owl to eat.

“Hey, don’t go givin’ that thing human food. You’re gonna kill it,” Kudo said, eyeing the scene critically.

“Oh... Don’t worry. She’s Ulula’s familiar,” Kukurū replied.

“Familiar?”

“Surely you must be joking. It can’t be, it just *can’t*. Did they teach you

nothing of familiars at the Academy of Magic? I take it, then, that you don't have familiars of your own? How in the world do you send letters, then? Don't tell me you hire *couriers*?"

"We try to blend into human society, so yeah, we do hire couriers. What's the problem with that?" Hort shot back.

"Unbelievable! I suppose your letters are about the most mundane things, too, aren't they? Ah, I see! Those of your station never have to worry about the contents of your letters being read, do you? Nothing you write is of any import!"

Hort was all set to continue the exchange, but a long, deep sigh from Los stopped her short. Ulula, who looked ready to go in for the kill, found herself looking at the ancient witch as well.

"Young...Ulula, was it? I understand thine interest in my little ducklings, but save thy pleasant chatter for after the meal. 'Tis getting cold. Hort, the same goes for thee."

"But she keeps digging at me!"

"Well, a single glance doth suffice to see that the bird is a familiar. I cannot help but acknowledge thine inexperience in failing to see it. But there are so few witches who keep familiars in this day and age... Was there not a single one at the Academy of Magic?"

Saybil ran through the faces of the witches at the Academy. "I don't...*think* I've ever seen one before... Professor Zero doesn't have a familiar, and neither does Headmaster Albus... And neither do you, right, Professor Los?"

"Those two are not the sort to devote themselves to caring for a familiar, and I have my little Ludens for company. They're a touch inconvenient, you see,

familiars... Adorable, of course, so they were quite popular about two centuries ago..."

"D-Do you mean to insinuate that the familiar my father gifted to me is out of vogue?!" Ulula snapped, standing up from her seat and glaring down at Los.

"I said nothing of the sort. I myself once gave a familiar to one of the children I fostered... Though he wasn't able to care for it properly, and wept bitterly when it died."

"Is that so? I received Ulula here from Father when I was five years of age. She has the same name as I do, you see. Isn't that lovely? I have cared for her every day—Ulula is a part of me, after all. Your child must have been awful, to let his familiar die like that!"

She was clearly trying to be provocative, but Los just took another spoonful of vegetable soup, then cocked her head and said, "Thou art not mistaken," as if they were simply discussing the weather. "In any event, the child was fussy and loathed to be left alone—he would cry and wail, and thus I gave him a bird... But when I returned to our abode after a brief absence, I found the child crying and cradling his familiar's lifeless body in his arms."

"If you gave him a familiar, then...your child could use sorcery?" asked Saybil.

"And with prodigious talent. Though it has been perhaps two hundred years since last we met..."

"Do you...want to see him again?"

"Of course not," Los cackled. "I am retired from that role. There are far more interesting things in this world than caring for one's children once they are fully grown."

"...You're a terrible parent."

A sudden wave of tension ran through the air as Ulula's pointed barb seemed to finally pierce Los's cool exterior.

"Oho?" The ancient witch raised an eyebrow. "I see. Thou art afraid of leaving the nest."

"Leaving the nest? *You* just abandoned your children, didn't you? Forsook your family to prioritize your own enjoyment? I'm sorry to disappoint, but Father would never do anything of the sort. Aah, I just can't believe *you* are the famed Dawn Witch, Loux Krystas. But I suppose I should be grateful. I've learned so much from meeting you... Learned that as a witch with no magical ability of your own, you have neither nobility nor pride—that you're nothing but a slave to that false demon in your staff!"

Saybil, Hort, and Kudo all stood up at once.

"I think that was over the line. You went too far, and you're going to take it back."

"Professor Los would never abandon her children! She watches them grow, then sends them out into the world. That's only natural," added Hort.

"The fuck's up with your pops, anyway? You gonna spend the next few centuries clingin' to his coattails and playin' best friends or somethin'? That's way grosser than what Professor Los did."

"Enough. If you three continue to take issue with every mote of drivel slung your way, you will never survive in witch society."

"I'm sorry. But I can't let it go."

"This is our fight."

"Just be quiet, Professor Los!"

“What is the meaning of this! All three of you turning rebellious at once?! Haah... Enough, I say, enough. Think you of the job that blasted Albus sent you here to do—”

But Los’s attempts to wrangle the situation were cut short.

“I shall gladly take back my words,” Ulula said. “*If* you can beat me in a duel. That should demonstrate once and for all who is the more brilliant—your professor or my father. Though I hardly expect a worthless parent whose child killed his own familiar to be capable of adequately educating her pupils!”

Ulula’s shrill laughter echoed through the hall.

“Y-You can’t, Ulula,” Kukuru began. “Papa will be angry...!”

“What’s the issue, Kukuru? Duels are an everyday fact of life. Though I suspect Father may be disappointed he was not here to witness me stamp out these fools in person!”

“But Ulula... That’s the Dawn Witch herself.”

“Are you really so scared of the demon in that staff of hers? Don’t worry. Father could snap that thing in two with a flick of his finger...which would kill the staff’s contracted witch as well. Aren’t you curious to see what that would look like? Wouldn’t you like to see these students of hers wail as they watch their failure of a tutor breathe her last?”

Saybil took a deep breath. He could feel the anger rising inside him—anger that was difficult to quell. It was different from what he’d felt when the Mage Battalion bullied and ostracized them. He felt an irrational impulse taking hold, contrary to all reason.

“I accept your challenge.”

Los put her head in her hands, but Saybil had clearly accepted the duel—there were plenty of witnesses in the hall to attest to that.

Saybil knew what he'd done was rash, but equally felt he couldn't back down.

"So? Who's it going to be? Wait, you lot don't even know the proper etiquette of dueling, do you? I expect it's not in the curriculum at the Academy of Magic."

Talk of the contest rippled through the hall, and all those present set aside their cutlery and moved to begin the preparations.

Ulula climbed atop a long table. "Don't worry. I'll explain everything. Within the Forbidden Library, duelists aren't permitted to kill their opponents. We are, however, allowed to use all other means at our disposal. The first to knock their opponent from the table is the winner."

"Huh. Less bloodthirsty than I expected," remarked Saybil.

"A duel between witches is a test of their skill with sorcery," Ulula continued. "Duels held here in the Library are judged by the chief librarian himself. That way no one can cheat, since the chief librarian sees absolutely *everything*."

"Me! Me! I'll do it!" Hort shouted, and tried to jump up onto the table to face Ulula—but Saybil caught her by the wrist.

"Sayb?"

"I'll do this."

"Huh? But—"

"This is *our* fight. *All three of us*." Saybil tapped the pouch at his waist.

Inside were magic potions he had brewed, some imbued with Kudo's healing magic, others with Hort's attack spells. Saybil himself wasn't able to use most magic properly yet, and attempting any high-level attacks could spell disaster

for everyone in the hall.

Even so, I have to fight.

Hort wavered for a moment, then smiled and raised a hand, palm out. “All yours!”

Saybil lightly slapped her hand and hopped up onto the table.

3

There was one very simple reason Ulula hated mages: she had been rejected by the Academy. Ulula’s father loved all things new, and so had naturally been interested in the rise of magic. When the Academy first opened in the Kingdom of Wenias, his eyes had glittered with the wish that he, too, could enroll there. So Ulula had thought he would be pleased if she got in, and secretly went to take the entrance exam; she wanted to surprise her father—and expected to pass as a matter of course.

Instead, she was turned down flat. She remembered how she felt the day her familiar flew in with the letter of rejection, as if the anger and shame might drive her out of her wits. It was not for lack of magical talent that she was turned away—Ulula was rejected with two little words: “Unsuitable applicant.”

Now three graduates of that very school were standing there before her. She had heard they even skipped a grade and graduated early thanks to their special talents. She was also told they were students of the Mud-Black Witch, progenitor of all magic...and had been sent to the Library by the very headmaster who had kept her out of the Academy. Not only that, but they were receiving special treatment from the chief librarian of her father’s beloved

Forbidden Library.

Just how much are these common little wretches worth? Ulula had been training and studying sorcery for as long as she could remember. Having heard that talented witches were capable of creating their own unique magic, she had devoted herself to such research...and even succeeded in creating something of the sort. *I am more talented than they are. I'm smarter. I'm worth more. And I can prove it. I will prove it.*

"Let us follow the rules of old. We stand back to back, then alternate five paces, counting each step aloud, before turning to face the opponent. We must count the fifth pace in unison, though, or the duel is over."

"Ah, okay... Thanks, I might've accidentally disqualified myself if you hadn't told me," said Saybil.

"Do you mistake me for some bottom feeder who would exult in getting one over on an ignorant child? Sorry to say I won't give you the chance to cry foul—you'll simply have to accept your defeat without such sniveling!"

"So we stand back to back in the middle of this table, then?"

"At least offer *some* kind of retort! You're making it seem like I'm all bark and no bite!" Ulula snapped angrily, but Saybil just blinked at her.

"I'm not making it 'seem' that way... If you lose to me in this duel, it's just going to 'be' that way, isn't it?" His expression didn't budge.

Ulula somehow managed to control the rage threatening to contort her face, and twisted it instead into a sneering grin. "Back to mine!"

At her instruction, Saybil moved to the middle of the table. Only now that he was right in front of her did Ulula realize how startlingly tall and imposing he was. *Perhaps it was his slouch that prevented me from noticing at a distance?*

And what's this...this chill...?

The moment she turned her back on Saybil, Ulula felt an uncomfortable *something* creep slowly up her spine. She softly moistened her dry lips with her tongue. The urge to turn and look—to identify the source of that *something*—was nearly overpowering. A terrible, almost totally instinctual anxiety swept over her.

But why? It can't be. He's just some inferior little boy—

“So, am I supposed to start counting?”

“Ah...” It was only when his voice broke in on her reverie that Ulula realized how tense she was. She clenched her teeth. “Need you even ask? The inferior party *always* begins the count!”

“Sorry, I didn’t know... Right then, one.” Saybil took a long step forward.

As the pressure moved away from her back, Ulula couldn’t help but feel relieved. “Two!” She took a step, and felt the presence slip further away.

“Three.”

“Four!”

On the next step, we turn.

Ulula took a deep breath.

“Five!” The two of them counted in unison and turned to face each other.

What is he...?

Saybil wasn’t looking at Ulula. He was staring into the crowd—at her owl.

Ulula froze.

But—I didn't tell him that. I never let on that it wasn't against the rules.

“Stop! Not Ulula!”

“Sorry, but you’ve got to protect her, right?” Saybil crushed the little bottle in his hand and a serpent of flame coiled out of the liquid that overflowed from his palm, then lunged at the target he indicated.

“Ulula, fly!”

At Ulula’s scream, the owl took to the air from its perch atop Kukurū’s head and soared up through the great hall in a wide arc. Saybil’s magic was relentless in its pursuit, however.

His opponent tore a gemstone from her dress and threw it at the blazing snake. *“Hol Hoo-Hoo Horan! Jewel of water!”*

The jewel shattered in midair and water gushed toward the serpent Saybil had unleashed—but to no avail. The water slipped harmlessly past the flames, raining down on the occupants of the great hall below.

“It can’t be—NO!”

The fiery snake caught up with the owl—but in that instant, it was enveloped in a jet-black veil that extinguished it completely.

Ulula had no grasp of what had just happened. Yet that inky darkness, which shut out all light, was something she had laid eyes on only moments before...in the black orb of the Dawn Witch’s staff. The Staff of Ludens.

“...Why?”

“Sorry. I’ll help you down.”

Saybil picked Ulula lightly up by the waist where she stood dumbfounded

atop the table and set her down on the floor. Her jaw hung open.

Saybil offered a somewhat apologetic smile. “Go ahead. You can call me a cheater if you want.”

“Y-You...You little bastaaaard!”

Ulula’s rage exploded into an angry scream—and in that very same moment:

“Ulula! Language!”

At this sharp reprimand from somewhere among the crowd, all the blood drained from Ulula’s face. The onlookers parted, and a man came running into the great hall from the corridor without.

The man was dazzling, breathtaking, his long hair a festival of colors that drew the attention of all and sundry. He looked like a nobleman dressed for the ball, a pair of heeled boots adding to his already impressive height, and in his hand he held a thin ebony staff topped with a carved owl’s head. Each and every aspect of his gorgeous appearance was in perfect harmony.

“Father...!”

The man’s alluring eyes were fixed on Ulula in anger.

She cried out feebly, the pain of his gaze seemingly too much for her to bear.

Barthel, servant of the chief librarian, came rushing into the room hot on the man’s heels. He had evidently gone to fetch Ulula’s father in an attempt to resolve the duel peacefully.

Having fully expected to achieve a spectacular victory and instead been left with only anger and a very public defeat, Ulula was lost. “Th-This isn’t how it looks, Father. This cretin tried to kill my precious Ulula...!”

“Well, I knew you would protect your familiar,” said Saybil. “Though I wasn’t

actually aiming for the owl, just the ribbon around its neck.”

“Silence! Did you hear me asking for an explanation?! You just wanted everybody else to hear how clever you are, didn’t you? To brag about pulling off your little trick?”

“I more just wanted to explain myself to Professor Los. It doesn’t seem like that was a very ‘beautiful’ way of winning, by her standards...”

Loux Krystas met his eyes and tapped her staff against her shoulder. “The villain is always the most appealing role, I suppose.”

“I’m sorry. I just wanted to win no matter what... I wanted to make her take back that insult to your name, Professor.”

“Surely you jest? In an honorable duel between witches, thou couldst not defeat thine opponent without using the basest of tricks... And yet thy stated aim was to pay this girl back for ridiculing thy teacher? All this duel has demonstrated is that thy precious professor is an impostor just as little Ulula says—a powerless, foolish slave to the demon in her staff!”

Ulula let out a sharp laugh...but quickly realized that something was wrong. Her father had yet to say a word. He stood there motionless among the crowd, staring in astonishment—but he was no longer looking at Ulula.

“...Mama?”

At that single word from her father’s lips, Ulula felt like she had forgotten how to breathe. The man’s eyes, dark green around his jet-black pupils, were typically as capricious as a cat’s—but now they were open wide, completely transfixed by the figure of Loux Krystas.

Seeing this, the ancient witch muttered to herself in displeasure. “A most infelicitous reunion...”

For a moment, Saybil couldn't believe his ears...or if his ears *had* heard correctly, there had to be something wrong with his head—the word the man had blurted out seemed just that incomprehensible.

And yet, as if to emphasize that Saybil's ears and mind were in perfect working order, the man repeated it: "Ahh—Mama! Mama!" He went even further, tossing aside his staff and charging toward Los with arms extended like a lost boy who had finally found his way home. Saybil naturally stepped forward to try and stop him—as did Hort and Kudo, who also sensed something amiss.

Ulula's father ducked past them all with ease, however. "I missed you! I missed you! Oh, how I missed you!" Blubbering like a child, he caught up the diminutive witch and spun her around like they were acting out a scene in a play.

"O-Oi, hold a moment! Fianos, calm thyself!"

"Mama...! You remember my name?! Oh, I'm so happy! I love you!"

Refusing to set her down, Fianos squeezed Los like she was a stuffed doll. She struggled to get away, leaning backward with all her might...but the difference in size and physical strength between them was just too great.

"...She should have just given him her staff to hold and let it kill him," Saybil let slip under his breath, drawing shocked glances from Hort and Kudo... Though Los clearly didn't appear inclined to do anything of the sort.

"Sayb, isn't that a little extreme?!" Hort cried.

“Hm? You think so?”

“He must be that adopted kid Professor Los was talkin’ about,” said Kudo. “All kindsa witches and sorcerers end up at the Forbidden Library... There’re bound to be reunions like this every once in a while.”

“Isn’t that a little close for a mother and son, though...?”

“Forget the family ties—that’s a little too close for *anyone*.”

“Oh, but since she adopted him, they aren’t actually related by blood at all, right?”

Their eyes met, then all three looked back over at the unfolding scene, only to have their suspicions confirmed: Fianos was clearly attempting to press his lips to Los’s—and Los was, understandably, still doing everything she could to squirm out of his arms.

“Enough! Wilt thou...not...stop this, thou foolish child?!”

Finally, she brought the Staff of Ludens down hard on his head. Her lack of restraint was evident in the amount of blood that began to trickle down Fianos’s forehead.

He showed no sign that the blow had hurt him, however. “Sorry. I guess I just got a little carried away,” he said, putting Los down with an openly remorseful look on his face.

The instant her feet touched the ground, Los leapt backwards in search of escape, alighting beside Saybil and the others. Ulula and Kukuru rushed over to Fianos, and Hort frantically hugged Los close, trying to keep her away from him.

“A-Are you okay, Professor Los?! Did he kiss you?!”

“Hmph, I...I am fine. Nonplussed, perhaps, but that is all.”

“The hell was that all about? Ain’t that guy your son?!”

“Son... Aye, but... Well, thou canst see for thyself... And yet, two hundred years have passed—I never expected the fool to charge at me like that, undaunted as ever...”

Fianos appeared to finally notice the three mages’ existence, and looked over Saybil, Kudo, and Hort in turn. His eyes lingered on Hort in particular, and he smiled broadly at her. Even Saybil could see that a single one of those sweet smiles would make any normal girl weak in the knees. But his expression had no effect on Hort, who was herself a master of the charming smile.

“Are you Mama’s students? My, how adorable. Especially the girl with the antlers. How about it... Want to be my daughter?”

“Huhhhh?! No way! No thanks! Not a chance, creep!”

“I see. Apologies. That was a little sudden, I suppose.”

Hort had goosebumps all over, but Fianos didn’t seem particularly perturbed at being shut down so forcefully. His gaudy appearance was at odds with this even temper—which raised the question of how Ulula could have turned out the way she did.

“Let me know if you ever change your mind. I’m sure we’ll be spending more time together from now on, so you’ll have the opportunity to get to know me... Slowly, of course.”

“Huh...? Ahem, what exactly do you mean...? I really wasn’t planning on spending another *second* with you.”

“Oh! Mama hasn’t told you? The fact is—”

“Hold thy tongue, Fianos! Thou art under a monumental misapprehension!”

“Now, don’t be shy, Mama. It’s okay, I’ll be the one to say it.” Fianos turned to Hort, his smile so radiant that it seemed almost like an illusion as it lit up the gloom of the Forbidden Library. “You see, Mama and I are to be married!”

She’s right—there’s clearly some kind of misunderstanding here, thought Saybil.

Los stood facing Fianos, furiously denying his statement, but the man’s head was clearly stuffed full of flowers and rainbows where his brain cells should be.

I’m sure I shouldn’t engage with him, should just brush this off like the insignificant nonsense it is. But before Saybil’s body could catch up with his thoughts, a knee-jerk response caused him to open his mouth and declare: “Sorry, *I’m* the one who’s going to marry Professor Los.”



Chapter Three



The silence was broken by unbridled, full-throated laughter—it was Fianos, holding his sides and hooting. After he finally got his mirth under control, he put an arm around Saybil as if the two of them were the best of friends, and began nudging the young man in the side.

“I get it, youngster, I do! Mama truly is captivating, isn’t she? Impossible to be around her and not fall in love—I should know. She’s kind, smart, strong, beautiful... No man can ignore her when she walks into a room! Spending any time as her student, you were naturally helpless to resist.”

“Would you mind giving me some space sir you’re making me very uncomfortable,” Saybil said, still expressionless as he tried to push Fianos away. The man was treating him like a child—though maybe Saybil inevitably just sounded to him like a five-year-old boy declaring he wanted to marry his teacher...since according to Los’s explanation, despite looking like he was in his mid-twenties, Fianos was in fact over two hundred years old. Not that it meant Saybil was going to let this slide.

Forcefully extracting himself from Fianos’s arm, Saybil sighed pointedly. “It’s pretty clear that Professor Los hasn’t agreed to marry you.”

“Mama always was the bashful sort.”

“I do not feel in any wise bashful about thy proposal... I simply loathe it.”

“Don’t be so mean, now. It’s been two centuries since we last met! You could at least be a *little* interested in how worthy I’ve become of you after all those long years. Ah, I almost forgot! Might I introduce you to my daughters?” Fianos

threw his arms around Ulula and Kukuru and pulled them close. “My eldest, Kukuru, and her younger sister, Ulula. Ulula is still a bit of a baby, but her talent for sorcery is unparalleled. And it seems she has an interest in magic, too.”

Kukuru seemed a little embarrassed by the introduction, while Ulula appeared to be dying of discomfort.

“Ah, now I see! I was wondering about that spell... The ‘Hol Hoo-Hoo Horan’ one with the water,” Hort said. “It looked like magic to me, but...that was sorcery?”

“Oh, you saw it, then?” asked Fianos, giving Hort a broad grin. “Ulula’s always researching day and night to come up with unique spells of her own. It’s a little different from the magic you use, but just as potent.”

“Her own unique spells?! Wow, that’s amazing!” exclaimed Hort with genuine admiration.

“Of course it is,” Ulula said, turning up her nose disdainfully.

Fianos smiled again. “The process of creating magic itself isn’t all that difficult—the Mud-Black Witch showed us that in spades. But the kind of magic Ulula makes can only be used by the caster who created it in the first place, so it’d be a whole different story to make her spells teachable like the ones you learned at the Academy of Magic. Even I should like to study there, if only they’d admit me. Ah—come to think of it...” Fianos glanced down at Ulula where she stood by his side. “You were dueling, were you? Over what? You sounded so angry—I’ve never known you to use such foul language.”

Ulula turned pale. She adored her father, who in turn was besotted with Los, the witch he called “Mama”—the same witch whom Ulula had insulted, ignorant of her father’s feelings, provoking Saybil into a duel to redeem his teacher’s

honor.

Ulula bit her lip and looked at the floor.

Saybil saw the expression on her face—ready for rebuke, or more likely a furious scolding—and the lie rose naturally to his lips. “Th-That was my fault. I said I didn’t know what a witches’ duel was all about, and Ulula offered to teach me...”

“That’s right! But then Sayb decided to attack Ulula’s precious owl, and lifted her down off the table while she was distracted! That was enough to make even *me* angry!”

“Kinda overdoin’ it in your first duel, doncha think, dude? You sure that wasn’t against the rules?”

Hort and Kudo took Saybil’s cue and piled on to criticize his actions.

“But she said anything goes, so long as I didn’t kill the person I was dueling with...”

“I wanted you to fight fair and square, Sayb!” exclaimed Hort.

“Couldn’ta beat her if he did,” put in Kudo.

“Victories won by such means may cause thine enemies to multiply, young Sayb. ’Tis important to keep thine audience in mind at all times.”

Thus Saybil learned that it was possible to win a battle and yet lose in the court of public opinion.

Fianos laughed cheerfully. “Oh, is that all? That isn’t against the rules at all... Even if it is an antiquated approach not much used in recent times. In any event, it’s a little childish of you to be upset at such tactics, Ulula.”

“I-I’m sorry, Father,” she whimpered as Fianos gently stroked her hair, her

face still white as a sheet.

Ulula couldn't help but notice how Saybil, Hort, and Kudo had covered for her, of course. Her eyes trembled with uncertainty, restlessly stealing glances at the three young mages.

"Sorry, you three. Ulula's never lost to anybody before. She's prone to causing such misunderstandings, but she's not a bad sort. I hope you young people will all be able to be friends after this. Now then, I have a few things to discuss with Mama, so if you'll ex-huh? Mama?"

Before anyone knew what was happening, Los sped from the great hall like her life depended on it. Fianos watched her disappear into the throng of onlookers for a split second, then charged after her.

"Mama, wait! Hey, how exactly did you manage to hide from me for two hundred years, anyway? I could never find you no matter how hard I looked. But now you're here to see me, which *must* mean you've come around to the idea of marrying me, right? Don't be shy, let's talk about this! Mama, please!"

"Cease thy pursuit! I told thee our ties were severed! 'Tis but unhappy coincidence that I am come here, naught but a chance encounter!"

"A chance encounter?! How wonderfully serendipitous!"

"Ooh, curses! Thou art irksome beyond words!"

The children were left standing dumbly in the great hall as Los dashed away, leaving a trail of echoing screams in her wake.

"I don't know... Maybe I should stop all this one-sided stuff about being in love with Professor Los..."

"Th-That's amazing, Sayb! You're, like, really maturing as a person!"

“More importantly, how the *hell* does he still think she’s into him after Los ignored him for *two hundred years*...? Gotta hand it ta the guy, that’s perseverance.”

“My father is incredibly devoted and pure of heart! Don’t speak of him as if he’s some sort of disgusting pervert! Does every little thing you three do have to be so thoroughly irritating?!”

“Huh?! What’s your goddessdamn problem, anyway?!” Hort shouted. “The second your precious papa leaves, that’s what you say to us? We covered for you, how ’bout a little thank you?!”

“I didn’t ask you to do any of that, did I? I’m sure you only intend to use it to blackmail me in the future, anyway! But unfortunately for *you*, my father will never believe a word you say!”

“Given how many people saw what happened, there’s a good chance he’ll find out the truth whether we tell him or not,” said Saybil, looking around the hall.

An anxious cloud fell over Ulula’s face once more. “But... B-But I only...” Suddenly she began to cry, great teardrops rolling down her cheeks.

Saybil panicked. “Huh? S-Sorry! Was it something I said?”

“Don’t flatter yourself! Who in the world would ever cry on *your* account?! I don’t care in the slightest if the truth gets out. The bond I have with my father is far too strong to be affected by a little thing like that. He may scold me, but it will go no further...!”

The speech came smooth and easy, but she clearly didn’t believe a word of it. In fact, she seemed half-certain that their relationship would crumble completely if Fianos learned the truth.

Hort frowned and looked down at Ulula. Perhaps it was Hort's clothes, or her build, or the fact that she was taller than Ulula, but she appeared much older than the twenty-five-year-old witch. "Hey... Are you two really family? Fianos asked me earlier if I'd like to be his daughter, so, like...was it the same for you?"

Ulula pursed her lips and said nothing.

It was Kuku who broke the silence, answering in her stead. "Ulula was always an incredibly talented girl... But those with a talent for sorcery are a little different from other people, and they can't live a normal life among human society. Ulula needed a family, so Papa and I made her part of ours."

"Kuku! There's no need to tell this rabble anything!"

"Oh... Sorry, Ulula."

"Enough...! I never want to see any of your faces ever again!"

With that, she turned to walk away—but Kuku caught her by the sleeve. "That won't do, Ulula. Papa says he's going to marry Mama, so we have to get along with Mama's children."

"Father is going to marry *me*! I don't care about that stunted little crone, and I certainly don't need to concern myself with the friendship of these three pitiful mages!"

"Ulula..."

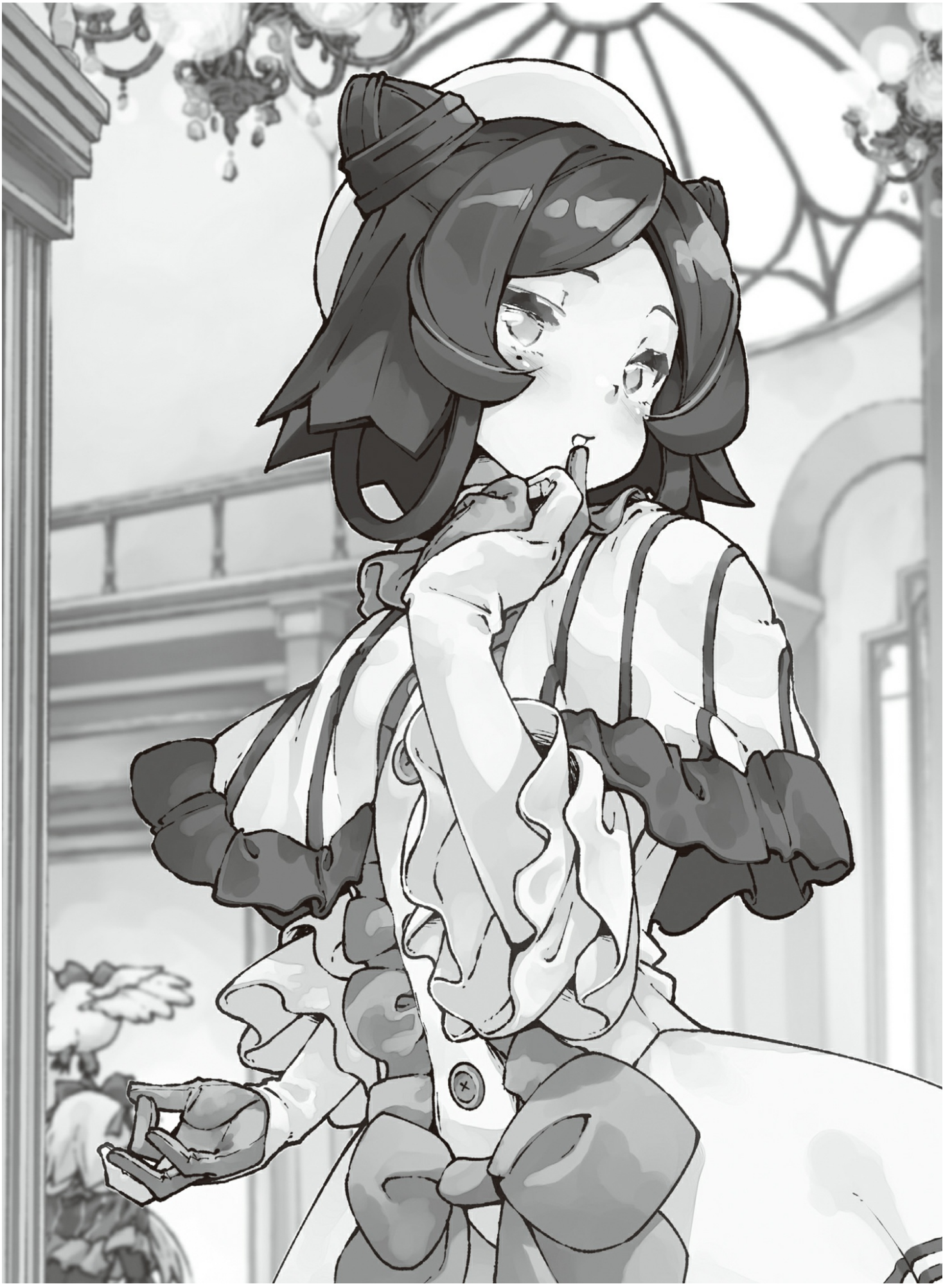
"You saw it too, didn't you, Kuku? Loux Krystas doesn't have any interest in Father anymore. She has new children to look after now. Poor Father! He spent two hundred years believing that she only cut their family ties because she intended to marry him. But he was mistaken—his beloved Mama simply hated him!"

Wiping away her tears with both hands, Ulula ran from the great hall, her owl

flying after her.

Kukuru sighed sadly. "...What should I do...? I wonder if Ulula is going to leave the family..."

"Fianos mentioned you were older than your sister but...how old are you, exactly?" Hort asked out of the blue.



Kukuru tilted her head lazily to the side. “Papa and I have been together for about a hundred years now.”

“Whoa! That’s a heck of a long time!” exclaimed Hort. “You’re, like, practically an ancient witch! I mean, right?!”

Kukuru flashed a smile—one that looked just a little bit like Fianos’s. “Well, Papa promised he would give Kukuru a family. But all this time, he couldn’t find Mama... Then he brought me Ulula when she was five years old. The people of her village were about to kill her. She was so little and cute, I fell in love with her right away! With Ulula around, I wasn’t sad, even though Mama wasn’t there.”

“I...see...”

“But Mama’s so little and cute, too, isn’t she? Just like Ulula used to be.” Kukuru giggled excitedly, a blush rising to her cheeks. “Kukuru wants Mama. Very badly.”

2

The chief librarian’s office was on the top floor of the tower. The area was highly restricted even compared with the rest of the Library, and was only accessible to a very few—servants and old friends, for example.

Los crept slowly out from under the writing desk and looked up at the white-haired boy across from her, his footman Barthel standing behind him. “Phew... I believe I have finally lost him... You have my thanks, Librarian.”

“Personally, I would have been curious to see you accept the man’s advances,

and to watch the romance between the two of you blossom. His love has remained strong for two centuries, after all. The conclusion to such a tale would be fascinating indeed.”

“Heaven forfend! I cannot say I think much of thy penchant for snickering as thou peekest at the misfortunes of others!”

“I am also interested to see if the young boy’s love bears fruit, of course. Loux Krystas—after three hundred years spent fleeing from romance, how does it feel to have so much of it suddenly dumped into your lap?”

“I feel nary a thing. How many tales of doomed love dost thou think I have witnessed over the years? There is no way to prove one’s love to be eternal—not so long as one of the parties must needs perish.”

“But Fianos has proved that love may last two hundred years, at least.”

“Yet where is the proof that he will have no change of heart in the next hundred?”

“So there is value only in eternal love?”

“I detest tragedies. And one cannot enjoy love stories while in constant fear of a tragic ending. In any case, ’tis without the realm of possibility! The poor, crying child asked for his ‘Mama’ to sleep with him! I comforted him, no more!”

“There is plenty of precedent for amorous feelings between parent and child. And there is no taboo, given your lack of blood relation.”

“Then it must in truth be something else... Perhaps the man is simply not my type.”

“What kind of partner do you desire, then?”

“Thou art awfully persistent!”

“I have always enjoyed talking of love.”

“And yet never didst thou use to dig so deeply into *my* affairs.”

The chief librarian thought for a moment. “...You and I were a little too similar,” he murmured.

Los nodded. “In our mutual inability to grow old, perhaps, aye.”

Outwardly, at least, Los and the chief librarian appeared to be about the same age. Together in his office, they looked like a pair of young children who had snuck into their parents’ study.

“And now there is someone I love as well.”

“Egad! Since when...and whom?!”

“She is not here. She spurned me and fled this place. But...I speak of one of this man’s adopted children.”

Barthel cleared his throat, as if to say he would prefer the chief librarian drop the subject.

Los’s eyes sparkled, however. “Is that so?! Thou hast been enjoying such strange and abstruse entanglements in my absence! How unfair!”

“I think I comprehend it now, somewhat.”

“Oho?”

“I understand the heart that fears love, that shuns it, that gives it a wide berth. I do not grow old, but someday she will wither and die...as happened to one I loved before. That time I did not know that what I felt was love—but this time I do. And because I do, I imagine it would be all the more painful to lose her.”

Saybil, Hort, and Kudo had come to the North to learn more about the Remnants of Disaster and then report their findings to the Academy of Magic in the Kingdom of Wenias. The northern half of the Great Continent was not so friendly to humans as to allow them to face such threats without proper knowledge and preparation, however. So, having heard from Los that there was an illustrated compendium of Remnants of Disaster in the Forbidden Library, Saybil and the others headed for the Library's grand reading room once the incident of the duel was concluded.

The reading room's ceiling was so high that it almost seemed as if the tightly-packed walls of books stretched all the way to the top of the tower itself. Not only that, but the bookshelves were arranged in a labyrinthine series of concentric circles—one wrong turn, and an unsuspecting patron might never find their way out of the maze of tomes and treatises.

“Whoaaa—! Books! Look at all the books!!”

“Wow... I could read ten a day and it'd still be decades before I got through them all.”

“Yeah, it's amazin' and everything, but we're tryin'a find one book in all this...? Like, how the hell...? You really think we're gonna lay hands on this thing before we shrivel up and die...?”

“The books on that shelf constitute a catalog. If you are in search of a specific book, I believe consulting that will be the best way to locate it.”

“A catalog? Damn, all this? Thanks, much obli—C-Commander Amnir?!”

Kudo only made it halfway through his thank you before screeching in sudden

recognition and performing a positively acrobatic backwards leap, earning himself an unwanted round of applause from Hort and Saybil.

Glancing sidelong at Kudo, who was backed up against the shelf with his hand on his chest to suppress the desperate pounding of his heart, Amnir slowly drew one of the hundred or so thick volumes that comprised the catalog out from beside the reptilian beastfallen's head. "This specifically catalogs all the field guides and illustrated compendia in the Library. If you require the one concerning Remnants of Disaster, you might consult the final page."

"L-Listen, I... I..."

"My... Your scales really do change color, don't they. I had wished to speak with you like this sooner, but while the Battalion is on the march I cannot spare too much time for any one person. Are you able to change the color of your scales at will?"

"N-No... I'm not..."

"I see. Then I need never doubt your words. How wonderful." Amnir smiled, opened the book to the final page, and handed it to Kudo. He accepted it awkwardly, then just stood there like a piece of taxidermy.

Hort popped her head in from the side to take a peek at the open page. "She's right! There it is!" she exclaimed.

"Amazing," said Saybil. "There are so many books in the catalog alone... Do you know what's in all of them?"

"Of course."

Amnir didn't appear to be bragging—her expression indicated that she really did think this was a matter of course.

"With its precise illustrations and detailed accounts of the creatures the chief

librarian has observed, the compendium is the first book every soldier dispatched to the North must consult. Far too many aspects of the situation here would be untenable without the knowledge contained therein.”

“So, um... I’m a little confused. If this book is so thorough...why are we here?” Saybil asked.

“Looking at a thing is very different from coming into contact with it.”

“...Right, of course.”

“That made sense to you, Sayb?!”

“Well, yeah. I didn’t use to have any memories, so there were times when I’d *think* I knew what something was because I’d read about it in a book, but it ended up being completely different when I actually encountered it in real life... If all the chief librarian can do is see, then he doesn’t get any information about temperature, sound, smell...”

Hort gave a start. “Now I get it! Even if he can tell us that something, like, *looks* venomous, he can’t know what that venom smells like!”

“So our job is ta get more detailed info an’ fill out the resta this book... Am I gettin’ that right?”

Saybil nodded. “Guess we ought to find where these venomous Remnants of Disaster live and collect information that the chief librarian can’t get through sight alone. Then...if possible, we should capture one and bring it here for research.”

“No.” Amnir instantly shut down Saybil’s suggestion. “That would be far too dangerous. As commander of the Mage Battalion, I cannot permit you or anyone to keep Remnants of Disaster at hand unless you have *absolute* confidence that you can control them.”

“Absolute confidence...” Saybil thought for a moment. He hadn’t seen it with his own eyes, but when they were defending Zero’s village during their graduation exam, he had heard that Los completely neutralized a swarm of carnivorous insectoid creatures born of a Remnant of Disaster.

Knowing a demon’s name meant having complete control over that demon’s power.

“You mean... Unless we can identify the name of the demon who created it?”

Amnir nodded.

Hort’s hand shot up into the air. “Then, then, then...! Is there a book that records all the demons’ names and what they’re like?!”

Amnir silently stepped toward Kudo, who still had his back plastered against the bookshelf. “Duck.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

Kudo did as he was told, and Amnir plucked a volume from one of the shelves he had been standing in front of. “Everything humanity knows about the names and characteristics of demonkind, distilled from the teachings of the Church, the chief librarian’s memory, and the wisdom of the witches, has been collected into these twenty-three volumes.”

“Twenty-three volumes?!” Hort took the catalog from Amnir and quickly began searching for the book she was after.

“Arghhh! There’s a ton of related reading, too!”

“There is a particular abundance of individual research into the most dangerous demons.” Amnir smiled. “I’m sure the collective knowledge of your predecessors will be of great help in your own research... And that your work in turn will aid us in our fight.”

“R...Right!”

“Oh, and one more thing,” Amnir said, leaning in close to Saybil’s face. “I heard about the commotion this morning. Started a duel, did you?”

“Oh, uh... Well, I... It just kind of...”

“Was this duel worth risking the lives of your friends for?”

“...Uhm...” Saybil couldn’t answer right away. Los had told him to forget about Ulula—she hadn’t been bothered in the slightest by the girl’s provocations.

Was there really any point in accepting that duel? There’s a fair chance Ulula could’ve attacked Hort or Kudo just like I went for her owl. Could I have protected them?

Saybil knew that if his opponent hadn’t been so attached to her familiar, she would have had the edge on him. *I got lucky, that’s the only reason I beat her.*

He still had no real measure of Ulula’s true strength in battle—not to mention that Los herself had shielded the owl from his attack, and turned her ire against Saybil.

“...She insulted Professor Los.”

“I have been informed of the particulars—and also of Barthel’s warning to you the night before. Hitherto I have left you three to your own devices, allowing you to do as you please. Hearing of this incident made me regret that decision somewhat. Perhaps I should have taken you under my supervision. Do you wish to be under my supervision?”

“N-No!” This time Saybil didn’t hesitate to answer.

So Amnir wasn’t just ignoring or neglecting us this whole time... She thought we would be okay on our own. She trusted us to tell her if there were any

problems, to be reasonable enough to seek help and guidance if we needed it.

“I see,” Amnir replied, turning on her heel. “Very well then. I have high hopes for you.” With that she strode from the room, several books tucked neatly under her arm.

Hort let out a great big sigh of relief. “She’s so imposing... I don’t think I took a single breath the whole time she was here!”

“I guess it was kind of...childish to accept Ulula’s challenge...”

“She made me so angry, though!” Hort fumed. “But yeah, like, Professor Los definitely wasn’t happy about it. Next time I guess we just let it go, even if she does try and start something. I mean, she didn’t even end up apologizing! So what was the point?!”

“Yeah... You’re right. It all seems pretty stupid now.” Saybil’s shoulders slumped.

“Anyway, did you see that, Sayb? Commander Amnir had some, like, super difficult-looking books under her arm!”

“Uh huh. She’s still studying that much, even though she’s mage commander...” Maybe that’s what it means to be someone who’s always moving forward, never letting a free moment go to waste. She doesn’t have time to worry about other people...but even while she’s leaving us to fend for ourselves, Amnir’s still thinking about us when it comes to the important stuff.

And that impressive woman had said she had high hopes for their research...

“For the time being, I think we should read through the whole compendium of Remnants of Disaster and that catalog of demons, then make a few talismans for ourselves... Heading out without *some* preparation would be suicide.”

“Totally! Safety first!”

Nodding to each other, Saybil and Hort made for the shelves indicated by the catalog—but stopped in their tracks when they realized Kudo wasn't following them.

“Kudo...?”

“Sh...She smelled so freakin' good...” he mumbled absently to himself, hands covering his face. His scales had taken on a rosy hue more vibrant than any Saybil or Hort had ever seen before.

+++

I should never have challenged him to that duel... Should never have caused such a scene.

Ulula slumped onto the sofa in her father's bedroom and glared sullenly up at the ceiling.

Fianos was a guest of the Forbidden Library. Two-hundred-year-old sorcerers of his kind were rare, but even setting his prodigious age aside, his talent for the sorcery of enchantment was unparalleled. All who fell under the spell of the Bondweaver Sorcerer would find “true love.” Lovers, family, friends, subordinates... All could be bent to his whim. But Fianos never, never thought to abuse his power.

—It is in the joy of love that true power resides.

Fianos looked down with contempt on those who imprudently sought out

love potions and the like.

–Look, all I am doing is giving form to the love that ought to be there already.

Ulula knew the depth of Fianos’s love...but had never imagined she would see him crying and clinging to a love that could not be his. *The Dawn Witch–Loux Krystas. Why does he think she’s worth so much, anyway? Her child wanted her love so desperately, and she ruthlessly abandoned him, ignored him for two hundred years.*

Night had fallen, but Fianos had yet to return to his room since he had discovered Los amid the ruckus that morning.

Kukuru is missing, too, for that matter–and she’s always hanging around me. Ulula suddenly felt terribly lonely.

Just then Fianos drifted into the room–unaccompanied, of course. He flopped weakly onto the bed, then rolled over to stare up at the ceiling.

Ulula ran to his side at once. “Father! Father, is something the matter? Are you all right?”

“Oh... It’s you, Ulula... Why are you in my room?”

“Because I was concerned about you!”

“Thanks. You’re a good kid.”

Fianos stroked Ulula’s cheek with his finger, and her eyes half-closed in bliss. Suddenly she realized he was staring straight at her.

“...Father?”

“It’s nothing...I was a little startled, that’s all.”

“Startled? By my face?”

“I thought you looked like Mama for a moment there—but...”

Ulula felt rending pain, as if her heart were about to tear itself apart.

“But you don’t look anything alike...”

“...Does that...make you sad, Father...?”

“Hmm.” Fianos closed his eyes. “A little, yes.”

He drifted off, and Ulula chewed her lip as she gazed down at his sleeping face. *If only I hadn’t challenged them to that duel... Drawn so much attention to them... I wouldn’t be so miserable now—*

3

“I didn’t say I’d fallen for her or anything! I dunno, she just, like, smelled really frikkin’ good!”

Ten days had passed since the duel, and Saybil, Hort, and Kudo had transformed into single-minded bookworms. They spent every day borrowing all kinds of books from the Library, putting their heads together as they devoured their contents, and creating talismans to counter any demons that appeared to have deep connections to the Remnants of Disaster. They also made all the magic potions they could, though they hadn’t considered how difficult it would be to come by certain ingredients in the Forbidden Library and were forced to search for suitable replacements. The three of them had expected the North to be a constant parade of battle and excitement, but their

reality ended up being a cycle of planning and research.

It was only natural that the conversation would turn to love during their breaks.

“But Kudo, your scales always turn such a cute color when you talk about Commander Amnir!”

“That ain’t what this color means! I think! Shit, I dunno!”

“You two are really reaching for the stars, though, huh... I mean, Commander Amnir and Professor Los?! They’re outta anybody’s league! And when there’s a super cute girl your own age standing right here and everything...”

“I’d say you’re out of our league, too, Hort...”

“No I’m not, Sayb! This star is right here, totally within reach!”

“Who wants ta reach for somethin’ that’ll burn you to a crisp if you make one wrong move? That’s just plain terrifying,” Kudo remarked.

“I won’t burn anybody!” cried Hort.

“Give it a rest!” came a high-pitched cry from behind them. “Haven’t you even the basic common sense to be *quiet* in a *library*?!”

Remembering that they were indeed in a library, the three mages sank back into their chairs without so much as a peep. It was only then that they realized who the voice belonged to.

“Oh. Hey, Ulula.”

“Do not presume to be so familiar with me. You three are so loud and boorish, I cannot concentrate at all on my book. I have absolutely no wish to so much as look upon your faces, but I was forced to come over here and caution you.”

“Well, erm... We’re...sorry.” All Saybil could do was apologize—they were clearly in the wrong.

Ulula let out an exasperated sigh. “You are such eyesores, truly...! Day after day you shut yourselves up in this library, never doing any real work. Aren’t you here to investigate the Remnants of Disaster? Why not just scurry off to the forest and get yourselves killed, then?”

“Hey! What kind of a thing is that to say?!”

“Leave it, Hort. She’s just pissed her precious father’s spendin’ every waking moment chasin’ Professor Los around.”

“Ulula, devour that lizard.”

“Whah?! Quit givin’ that owl evil commands!”

Ulula’s familiar began to peck at Kudo, making the room far more clamorous than it had been before Ulula came over to complain. Everyone else in the reading room seemed indifferent to Kudo’s cries, however.

Wait a minute... “Huh? There’s nobody else in here today, is there...”

“That’s because you three are so loud, *obviously*! They must all have taken their books up to their rooms to read in peace.”

“O-Oh no...! We really have been bothering everyone...!” Hort began to panic.

“...Just kidding.”

“Huh?! B-But then, why...?”

Overweening as ever, Ulula made a show of heaving another sigh. “I’m shocked you made it to the Forbidden Library at all, knowing as little as you do. The reading room is surrounded by a powerful barrier set up against the chief librarian. That is why he cannot enter it, nor see anything that happens inside.

You *do* understand how dangerous that is, don't you?"

"Dangerous...?" Saybil cocked his head.

Ulula angrily pounded the table where the three of them were sitting. "You could be assassinated by an antagonistic witch in here, and no one would be any the wiser! Which is why hardly any of the witches in this place stay in the reading room longer than they have to."

"Ohh... Wow, who knew?"

"Quit yappin' and do something about this damn owl, already!"

"Ah, sorry," said Saybil. "I figured it was okay since you'll just regenerate whatever damage it does to you."

"I can regenerate, sure, but that don't mean it don't hurt!"

That said, Saybil couldn't just drive the owl off willy-nilly—he couldn't help but think of the way Los had glared at him after he attacked it during his duel with Ulula. For now, he took off his jacket and put it over Kudo's head.

"Hey, that's enough! Call off your owl!" Hort cried.

"If you don't like it, why don't you leave? And then *never* come back. You can't possibly have failed to realize, can you? That I could kill you in here, and nobody would even try to stop me. Nobody would come to your rescue. Now then, Ulula! Tear out that lizard's eyes! Meanwhile, I think I'll start by killing this antlered boob monster—W-Wait! What are you doing?!"

Before Ulula could even finish, Hort casually stepped forward, grabbed her by both wrists, and pinned her against a bookshelf.

"While I was watching your duel, I got to thinking... You can't activate your magic with incantations alone, can you? All those gemstones on your clothes

have sorcery sealed inside them...which you activate with specific words, right? Kinda like Sayb's magic potions... Though those are *way* simpler and easier to use."

"So what?!"

"Well, what are you gonna do now? How do you plan to kill us? You can't use your magic if I'm pinning your arms like this, right? Unless you're way stronger than you look... And it's three against one. Maybe you could stab one of us in the back while we were on our own, but otherwise I don't think you've got much of a chance of killing *anyone*. All this big talk about the giving and taking of life, when you don't even know how to kill someone... Are all witches this pathetic?"

As Hort spoke her expression was flat and unemotional, but in her eyes burned something close to true anger and murderous intent. Ulula's eyes, on the other hand, welled with frightened tears that at last came rolling down her face in great drops.

"Don't cry! You're the one who started it, and now you're wailing like some victim just because you lost? Don't you think that's super lame?!"

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Take your hands off me!"

"Then call off your owl."

"Nh...Ulula! Attack! In for the kill!"

"Now yer really pissin' me off! You want me to throw your precious familiar on the grill tonight?!"

"Kudo, we should leave."

"Huh?! You sayin' we should run, Sayb?!"

“Well, it’s that or kill the owl...”

Kudo glared up at the familiar as it continued its tenacious attack, then swung his tail down hard on the floor and ran. “Dammit, I won’t forget this!”

“Whoa, you really do sound like a small-time thug when you say stuff like that, Kudo. Keep going, it’s a riot.”

“Quit enjoyin’ this, dumbass! C’mon, Hort, let’s get outta here!”

“I’ll be right there! I’m just gonna finish my conversation with Ulula first!”

“But—” Saybil began.

“Leave her be. It’s clear as day Hort’s stronger’n her.”

Realizing he was probably right, Saybil raced after Kudo and out of the reading room.

4

“Now it’s finally just the two of us... So whaddaya say, Ulula?”

The Library’s reading room was unsettlingly large, with a complicated tangle of bookshelves blocking the view in all directions. It was entirely possible there were other patrons somewhere, but as far as the two of them pressed up together against the bookshelf were concerned, they were completely alone.

“It’s about time you trotted off as well. I have nothing to say to you.” Ulula’s hands were still pinned against the bookshelf. It seemed her owl had pursued Kudo out of the reading room and into the corridor, still following the order to attack. If anyone closed the door, the familiar would have no way of returning to its master’s side.

“Look. I hate drawn-out fights, they’re so pointless. Can’t we just clear all this up? Like, what’s gonna make you happy? What’s it gonna take for you to be satisfied?”

“I want you gone, that’s all. Simple enough, no?”

“But what would that get you?”

“Peace of mind.”

“Okay, so seeing us around annoys you. But why? What is it about us that ticks you off so much? Our faces? Our voices? Our backgrounds?”

“You know very well what it is. I’m vexed by your mere existence! I regret having ever made your acquaintance. After all, you’re—”

“What? What are we?”

Ulula swallowed her next words. They had graduated early from the Academy of Magic, they had the admiration of the chief librarian—it was all so terribly galling.

And I wasn’t even allowed to attend! Not to mention that their professor has my beloved father chasing after her like a child... It’s unbearable. It all made her feel so wretched that the words caught in her throat until Ulula felt like she might choke. *It’s pure envy. I know that. But I cannot overcome this by my own efforts.*

Ulula had been turned down by the Academy of Magic, and Fianos never chased *her* around the Library. She had tried for twenty years to be his ideal daughter... *But now this Los woman shows up after two centuries, and she’s all he can think about, despite the fact she doesn’t want anything to do with him...*

“Kudo was dead right, wasn’t he? You love Fianos so much you want to marry him, so you’re pissed off that he’s all over Professor Los...and all you can do is

take it out on us.”

“...That’s not all. Father asked if you would become his daughter.”

“He sure did.”

“It’s like I’m not even special to him...! He’s my one and only father, but I’m not enough for him! It’s cruel!”

“Yes, it really is.”

Hort released Ulula’s wrists and pulled her into a tight embrace. Ulula tried to push her away in agitation, but Hort’s body was so warm and soft that she found herself helpless to resist. Tears streaming uncontrollably down her cheeks, she clung to Hort so the other girl wouldn’t be able to see her cry.

“I want to be it! I want to be number one! Father’s number one! But now I’ve lost it all! And it’s your fault, it’s all because you came here! You ruined everything!”

“Yeah, I know how you feel. It’s okay. I understand, I really do.”

“You don’t understand a thing! What could a little brat like you ever know about how I feel?!”

“I do understand... I mean, it takes one to know one, right?”

Hort’s hand stroking her back was warm, strong, comforting.

“Listen, Ulula. I really do think you’re amazing. You’re studying sorcery, making your own magic, you’ve got your own familiar... You’re only twenty-five, but you’re already on the level of an ancient witch! You’re an inspiration.”

“Stop it, you’re only making me more miserable. Don’t you get it? Don’t you see how blessed you are?!”

“I do. I know exactly how fortunate I am. I graduated early at the top of my

class from the Academy of Magic, I'm as talented as they come, and I've got an adorable smile and awesome antlers to boot. I've got amazing friends, and we've been given a prestigious job to do up here in the North. But it's still *me* that looks up to *you*. Don't you think that's awesome?"

Ulula raised her head from where it had been buried in Hort's chest. She sniffled, and Hort wiped her nose and tear-stained cheeks with a handkerchief. Ulula took it from her and blew her nose hard.

"Don't talk down to me. I don't need anyone to tell me that I'm the greatest witch in the world, and I certainly don't need your admiration."

"If you're the greatest witch in the world, it doesn't seem like a bunch of greenhorn mages should even catch your eye, let alone get under your skin..."

"W-Well...!"

"You're not worth something only because Fianos thinks you are. Even if he *is* obsessed with Professor Los, you're still super charming and attractive! Just like how even though Sayb's obsessed with Professor Los, I'm still super charming and attractive, too!" Hort grinned.

Ulula was stunned for a moment. "Sayb... You mean the boy with the vacant look...?"

"He's just a little out of touch with the world, but he's really smart!"

"...Cunning, perhaps. I'll give you that." Ulula stared down at the handkerchief in her hands, then balled it up and shoved it into her bag. "What terrible taste. A woman like you could bring any man to his knees... Why on earth choose something like *that*?"

"Hey, same goes! There must be plenty of better men for you to choose from!"

The two of them glared at each other for a moment, then burst into laughter.

Fanning at her flushed cheeks, Ulula shooed Hort away. “This face of mine would shock Father and Kukurū, I’m sure. I’ll stay here, so why don’t you go after your friends?”

“Well, I would kinda like you to do something about your owl and poor Kudo...”

“Ulula is clever; she won’t pursue her prey too far.”

“Can I pet her next time?”

“...Well... I suppose so...” Ulula mumbled, giving Hort a sidelong glance. “In return, perhaps...I might... Umm...”

“Hm? What is it?”

“...If you were to hold me tight again like that, I wouldn’t say no...!”

Hort looked startled, then opened her arms wide.

“Ah, not now! I’m fine for now!”

Her protest fell on deaf ears, however, and she once again found herself in Hort’s embrace, struggling against the pressure of the other girl’s body. It was warm, soft, suffocating...and smelled lovely.

“You’re *adorbs*! There’s a good girl! There, there!”

“That is *not* what I meant! Enough! I’ve changed my mind! I want you out of here after all, you eyesore!”

Pushing Hort away, Ulula fled deeper into the maze of bookshelves.

“Hey, welcome back. Everything okay?”

Hort returned to find Saybil and Kudo hard at work creating talismans in the common room of their guest apartment.

“Did you guys sort things out?” Saybil asked.

“Sure did.” Hort gave the two of them a satisfied smile, until Saybil pointed silently to an unnaturally wet patch around her chest.

“Gah! I’ve gotta get changed!” she cried, running off to her room.

“The hell was that?” muttered Kudo.

“Hmm... I figure a wet shirt can only mean one of two things... Either she spilled water on herself, or she hugged someone who was crying.”

“Hort...huggin’ Ulula?”

“Well it *would* explain the wet patch, wouldn’t it?”

Saybil and Kudo tried to imagine Hort embracing a sobbing Ulula.

And...

“Nope, couldn’t be. Not a chance,” Kudo declared.

“But maybe...?” Reconciliation had certainly *seemed* out of the question...

They were still lost in their ponderings when Hort returned with a fresh outfit on.

“So? Tell us how it went.”

“Hm? Well, I guess we’ll prob’ly be able to get along now... I don’t think she’ll try and start anything with us, at least.”

“For real?! How’d you pull that off?”

“Hey, I’m good at making friends!” Hort shot back with a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

That very same night, Ulula’s body was discovered in the reading room.



Chapter Four



Kukuru was cradling Ulula's bloody corpse in her arms and weeping. Drawn by her loud sobs, the usually indifferent witches slowly began to gather in the reading room, and when Kukuru opened her eyes there was a throng of people standing around her. Suddenly the crowd parted, and Fianos came at last to his two daughters.

"...Ulula... No... How could this happen...?!"

Even witches, who lived outside the bounds of human law, understood that there was to be no killing inside the precincts of the Forbidden Library. Any who wrongfully took the life of another within this sacred tower of knowledge would never be permitted to set foot in it again.

Which is why Fianos had let his guard down.

I was so caught up in the reunion with Mama that I left my powerless daughter to die alone.

"Kukuru, what happened here?"

"Ulula's...dead," Kukuru answered between wailing sobs.

He laid a hand on Ulula's arm—she was completely cold. And the blood that had spilled out of her body was dry and black. *How long has Kukuru been here, holding her like this—?*

"Where is her owl?"

Kukuru shook her head.

Ulula and her familiar were one—if something happened to her master, the owl should have come and warned Fianos. *The familiar, too, then? Did they kill it as well?*

They were in the reading room—into which the chief librarian could not see.

We have no way of knowing who did this.

Kukuru took a handkerchief from Ulula's bag and handed it to Fianos. "This isn't Ulula's," she said.

A murmur ran through the crowd of onlookers.

"Is there anyone here skilled in divination?! I can't do it on my own!"

Several witches stepped forward. Fianos smiled at one of them and made to hand her the handkerchief—but someone grabbed his wrist before he could. It was the Dawn Witch—Loux Krystas.

The corners of Fianos's mouth twitched up. "...Mama?"

"Thou hast no need of a divinator. That handkerchief belongs to Hort."

"Hort...? Ah, yes." Fianos recalled the girl with the fine antlers.

"I wish for thee to leave this matter in mine hands for the time being. I will hear what young Hort has to say."

"No, Mama," said Fianos quietly. "You can't shield her from this."

"That was not my meaning, Fianos. Thou art not calm in thy judgment at present."

"Calm?" Fianos ground his teeth. *Beloved Mama. I have longed for her so badly that I dreamed of her every night for two hundred years. That brilliance of hers has never dulled. I wanted her to love me. I was prepared to do anything to make that happen. But...*

“My daughter has been murdered—how can you expect me to stay calm?!”

Fianos’s roar shook the reading room to its rafters, and books rained down from the nearby shelves. In the face of the intense emotion—the *bloodlust*—emanating from every part of his being, Los’s expression hardened all the more.

She stood blocking his way, staff in hand, *Thou shalt not pass* etched into her face. Los was going to protect her charges—even if it meant a fight.

“Get out of the way. Please. It’s okay, I’m just going to ask her what happened. If your sweet little ducklings didn’t kill my daughter, then there’s nothing to be worried about.”

“If all thou wishest is for the girl to tell her story, then it need not be thee who goes. And if thy objection be that I lack the proper neutrality, why not leave her questioning to the chief librarian? Come, Fianos, we will go to him together.”

“You’ve always been like this, Mama. Coaxing, cajoling me to get your way. Did you think I hadn’t realized?”

“...Realized what?”

“That you sent someone running off to warn your little ducklings. That you’re just buying time for them to escape.”

“I...”

Fianos snapped his fingers, and instantly the onlookers surrounding them jumped forward and grabbed at Los. She leapt into the air—but just a little too late. Someone caught her by the foot and pulled her down. The impact sent the Staff of Ludens skittering from her hand. Without it she had no means to resist.

“What is the meaning of this?! What did you—?”

“I worked my enchantment. I am the Bondweaver—all are my allies.”

Los tried to push herself up off the ground, but someone straddled her back. Her arms and legs were pinned to the floor as well, but she managed to get her face up enough to look Fianos in the eye.

“Curse thee, Fianos—if dost hurt my little ducklings, I will do more than simply cut ties with thee!”

“You really do care for them, don’t you?” Fianos tried to smile, but tears came pouring out instead. He had lost his daughter. He was hurting—but Los would not grant him her comforting embrace. He had obsessed over the Dawn Witch for two centuries, but now there were others more important to her than him.

“A bitter pill... Me, I woke up one morning and suddenly you were gone.”

“Thou wert full-grown, and wanted more from me than I could offer as a parent. I drew the boundary, and thou didst attempt to cross it of thine own volition, Fianos!”

Los had seemed so tall once, an adult completely beyond his reach—but before he knew it, Fianos had outgrown her. He had become an adult, but she still looked like a little girl. He had panicked, knowing he was helpless to keep himself from growing older, and cursing himself for it. Yet still he had wanted to be by her side.

“I would never have said it,” he declared, crouching down in front of Los. He stroked her cheek, burning hot with rage, and kissed her tenderly on the forehead. “If I’d known you were going to abandon me, I would never have told you I loved you.”

“Fianos...”

“I really believed that you loved me, too... That you were the one person in

this wide world who would love me. But it wasn't true...and that's why I put together a family of my own. But now your little duckling has taken my daughter from me—perhaps. I can't take it, I really can't. It's too cruel. But I still can't bring myself to hate you, Mama."

Fianos stood.

"Wait with Kukurū, Mama. We'll talk later. Kukurū."

"Yes, Papa." Kukurū rose to her feet with a smile, then walked over to pick up the Staff of Ludens—with her bare hands.

Los was dumbfounded. "Inconceivable... How canst thou hold the staff so?!"

"Heh heh heh. Surprised?" Kukurū smiled shyly and hugged the Staff of Ludens tight. "See you later, Papa. Mama and I will play nice while you're gone."

Fianos ruffled her hair and walked calmly from the reading room.

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What a mess this is.

Rushing through the complicated tangle of the Library's corridors, Barthel set his mind to considering all the additional unpleasantness that was yet to come. The very thought exhausted him. Ever since the Forbidden Library had changed its name to the General Library, Barthel had been busy settling the disputes that arose between the eccentric witches and sorcerers who now filled its halls. Fianos was especially difficult to deal with. His visits to the Library were not all that frequent, but Barthel recalled one particular incident in which he had been

involved...

Fianos's daughters were both strong-willed witches—Ulula violently so. She was haughty, quarrelsome, and always looking for ways to demonstrate her superiority. Naturally, this led to conflict. In this particular case, the chief librarian had seen what happened, and Ulula was clearly in the wrong. Suddenly, though, everyone at the scene—even Ulula's victim—jumped in to protest her innocence. Each spoke as if she were their own beloved daughter, explaining that she had merely been playing a little prank, nothing more.

Fianos had the ability to manipulate others' sentiments of love and affection. He believed it was right to use his power to avoid bloodshed. But when moved by anger, he could spark a terribly one-sided massacre if he so desired. Cruelty rooted in love is all the more severe.

"Hort! It's an emergency, could you come with me for a little while?!" Barthel hurtled into Hort's room without stopping to knock. He expected a scream and a swift punch to the face, but received neither. Hort took one look at Barthel, then quickly picked up her bag and several books and dashed from the room clutching them in her arms.

"Huh?" Barthel couldn't stifle his surprise.

Hort was already banging on the doors next to and across from her own. "Sayb! Kudo! Emergency!"

A few seconds later they, too, emerged, holding their books and bags. The three of them looked at Barthel.

"What now?" they asked in unison.

Barthel tensed up at the question. He had dismissed them as children, but they wore the faces of soldiers who had confronted death and lived to tell the

tale.

“This way! Run! I’ll explain on the way!”

Barthel took off running, and the three mages followed after. He laid out the facts for them as succinctly as possible: Ulula was dead, Fianos suspected Hort, and the Library was no longer safe for them.

It’s an absurd situation, thought Barthel. Even reasonable adults would have trouble accepting all this on the spot.

But to his surprise, they had only one question:

“What about Professor Los?”

They’re worried about their friend. Barthel wavered, but finally resolved to tell them the unvarnished truth. “Fianos has her. I’m sure he doesn’t intend to take her life, but as for how long she’ll last...”

“Sayb, what do you want to do?” Hort asked, glancing over at Saybil as they ran. Barthel knew the boy was in love with the Dawn Witch.

Saybil thought about it for a moment. “First off, Hort definitely didn’t do this.”

“Of course I didn’t!”

“But if we start a fight to clear Hort’s name, we might end up hurting someone. Or we might get hurt ourselves.”

“Ain’t wrong there,” Kudo agreed.

“So we should retreat for now, and trust that Professor Los can clear up this misunderstanding.”

Hmph—even their decision-making is charmlessly mature. Barthel smiled wryly. *But these three have lived through things that make that inevitable. Is it because they’re mages? Or...* Barthel glanced at Hort’s antlers, and at Kudo.

Because they're beastfallen? Or maybe... He glanced at Saybil. It has something to do with being the son of an evil sorcerer?

Barthel had heard about their “baggage,” about the pasts they all carried with them—he knew it as cold information on the page... But seeing these young ones, still practically children, readying themselves for the worst like this—there was something about it that made him uncomfortable. They didn’t whine or rashly insist on having their own way, so there was no opportunity for him to lecture them.

Barthel had initially thought they were bad apples, letting themselves get worked up over nothing like that and accepting a duel without knowing how dangerous it really was.

But I misjudged them.

He led them out of the Forbidden Library, through the town, and straight to the gate of bones without stopping for breath. There was a horse-drawn cart waiting there for them.

“Get on!” Barthel barked, and the three mages leapt into the bed of the cart without hesitation.

“Giddy up now!” At the driver’s command, the horse reared up on its hind legs without so much as a whinny.

While the North was dominated by Remnants of Disaster, there were still several locations that could be considered safe—the Forbidden Library chief among them. The Mage Battalion, pride of the Kingdom of Wenias, had cleansed some of the towns along the main roadway, and there were churches where travelers could sleep safely as well.

Their driver knew just where to take them. They could spend a few days

laying low, then return when the time was right—

“Huh?! Mister Barthel?!”

Barthel felt like his heart might stop when that voice broke in on his thoughts. It was the driver—the one who should have been on the cart taking the three young mages to safety.

“...Wh—?” *What are you doing here?* But he couldn’t get the question out.

“See, I was... Mage Commander Amnir asked for me, and... I was only gone for a second, I swear...”

“Commander Amnir?”

The driver pointed behind him, and Barthel turned to see the mage commander standing there.

She flashed him an indomitable smile. “This is for the best,” she said simply, before turning without further explanation and leading the elite soldiers of her battalion toward the Forbidden Library to face down Fianos, who was no doubt raging through its halls in search of his quarry.

2

They had walked overland from the main roadway to the Forbidden Library, as there was no proper path that would take them there—but the cart they found themselves in now sped across the uncharted waste like it was nothing. Clinging to the side to keep from falling out of the jouncing cart, Saybil was, as usual, overcome with a terrible case of motion sickness, which had him spraying vomit all over the ground as they went.

“Hey, driver! How far are we going?! We’re, like, super far from the Forbidden Library already!” Hort shouted.

Raising his voice to be heard over the rattle and clatter of the wheels, the driver replied, “We’ll go a little further yet! I’d like to get as close to the main road as possible!”

It had been a four days’ walk from the road to the Library—hardly the kind of distance that could be covered in a single day, no matter how fast they went, and this pace was sure to tire out the horse before long.

“Hey, this isn’t going to work! Let the horse rest for a while! It’s fine, we can walk!”

“Let the horse rest?” the driver repeated with a chuckle.

Hort was about to snap at the driver for being so dismissive of the animal’s well-being, but before she could he pulled his hood back and her anger evaporated.

“What, you think me no better than some common horse? My training is on another level entirely. I’ve still got plenty of miles in me!”

“Raul?!”

It was indeed the young equine beastfallen, Mage Commander Amnir’s right-hand man. From behind he had looked like nothing more than a cloaked driver astride a horse, but upon closer inspection, the place where a human would ordinarily ride was empty, and in the space where the horse’s head should be there “sat” a rider.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What are you doing here, Raul?!”

“Hm? Do you object?”

“N-No, but I mean... Right?!”

Hort looked to Kudo for agreement, only to find he'd cracked his head going over a particularly large bump and was passed out, foaming at the mouth. Saybil, white as a sheet himself, was trying his best to keep the unconscious mage from falling out of the cart.

“Waah, it's a disaster back here! Please, Raul! Forget resting the horses, but at least give Sayb and Kudo a quick breather!”

“Sorry. Please just bear up a little longer. I'm gonna pick up the pace now!”

“Y-You monsterrrrrr!”

Hort's scream trailed out behind them as Raul sped across the wasteland. When he finally slowed and clattered to a stop, his three passengers were clearly in terrible shape.

“We should've stayed in the Library... This never would've happened if we'd stood our ground and fought...!”

Saybil crawled over the side of the cart and fell with a thud to the ground below. He had nothing left to throw up, but continued to retch nonetheless.

Kudo lay comatose in the bed of the cart with his eyes rolled back in his head.

“Wake up! Don't die on me!” Hort cried, trying to shake him back to consciousness. Kudo was able to render most physical attacks ineffectual, but apparently a brain-rattling blow to the head was still enough to put him out for the count.

Raul deftly unhitched himself from the cart and went to unload their things from the back.

“You three should rest inside the church. It's relatively safe around here, but

the Remnants of Disaster will still swarm weakened travelers.”

“You’re the one who weakened us!” Hort protested, tears welling in her eyes.

“Quite right.” Raul laughed cheerfully, slinging Saybil over his shoulder along with their belongings and trotting lightly into the church with a clatter of horseshoes.

With no village or town nearby, the half-ruined church stood alone, patched in places and barely standing. Hort followed Raul inside, somehow managing to drag Kudo along behind her, only to find that the interior was much cleaner than the outside suggested and well outfitted for accommodation. Beds lined the walls, and there was a grand table in the center where a few dozen people could sit and eat at once.

“Does this place belong to the Mage Battalion?”

“Uh huh. This is our first survey base. In the Mage Battalion’s effort to cleanse the North, job number one was to clear the road from the Kingdom of Wenias to the Forbidden Library and ensure safety along the route. This church served as the initial base for ongoing attempts to slowly enlarge the safe zone.”

Raul laid Saybil on one of the nearby beds and placed their things on the table. Hort dragged Kudo over to a bed, too, and rolled him onto it.

“Here, have some water.”

Saybil took the waterskin Raul proffered and drained it in one go. “Thank you. I really appreciate it... Though I did think the ride here was going to kill me.”

“If a cart ride is enough to kill you, none of you will survive long in the North anyway.” Raul’s expression remained defiantly cheerful in contrast to the severity of his words.

“...So many talismans,” Saybil murmured, glancing at the windows. They were

tightly packed with talismans bearing the name of every demon he could possibly think of. Anyone without knowledge of demons and wards might have mistaken them for a wonderful, elaborate decoration. Saybil got up on his knees and traced a finger along the window frame.

“Only once someone is capable of reciting every last one of those demons’ names—and their various attacks—from memory are they permitted to join our mission to cleanse the North,” Raul explained.

“That makes sense. You couldn’t even step outside without knowing these at the bare minimum.”

“Hmm, totally. It’s like a who’s who of all the ones that could kill you instantly. These’re all the demons we made talismans against first, too.”

Sick of trying to bring Kudo around, Hort had come over to stand by Saybil’s bed and was gazing at the window along with him.

A strange look came into Raul’s eyes. “You know them?”

“Huh?”

“The demons those wards are intended to counter.”

“Yes. Commander Amnir showed us the catalog... Told us this was the first thing members of the Mage Battalion learned.”

“And you learned them all?”

“We made talismans, too! Look!” Hort plunged her hand into her shirt and pulled out a necklace made of linked talismans.

Raul held it and inspected it closely. “It’s well made,” he said with a smile. Raul may have been a beastfallen, but his face was that of a strikingly handsome man. Doubtless that hint of a smile had thrown countless women

into an emotional quagmire from which they could never escape.

Hort, however, didn't even flinch—quite the opposite. “Really?! You think it's gonna be useful?! Really really?!” she exclaimed, pressing forward in her excitement.

“Hort.”

“Uh huh?”

“Your face is very close to mine.”

“Waaah sorry I wasn't thinking and I turned into Professor Los for a sec!” Hort leapt back at Raul's smiling remark, then turned to Saybil with sudden horror in her eyes. “Th-This isn't what it looks like, Sayb! I wasn't cheating on you! You're still the only one for me!!”

“Huh? Oh, uh... Thanks?”

“Boy, talk about getting shut down.”

“You don't need to say it out loud, Raul!”

“Shut the hell up! How'm I s'posed ta stay nice an' passed out with all your yammerin'!” Kudo jerked up in bed then clutched his head in sudden pain, his scales turning a gloomy green.

“Oh, Kudo, are you all right? In the head, I mean,” asked Saybil.

“How come you gotta ask it like that?!” Kudo shouted, putting a hand to his temple and casting Chordia.

“Hey, Sayb held you up the whole time you were passed out! You should be thanking him!”

“Haanh? Okay, thanks for that.”

“Ghnhh...! I know that’s exactly what I told you to do, but for some reason it *really* got under my skin!”

“So anyway, where the hell are we? An’ whadda we do next?”

All three turned to look at Raul.

“Hmm, good question... You *do* appear to be ready.”

He scanned the items they had brought with them: the necklace of talismans around Hort’s neck, the illustrated compendia of demons and Remnants of Disaster—all the things they had deemed necessary to bring along in a sudden emergency.

“Hiding out until the situation cools down would be a bore. Headmaster Albus sent you here to investigate the Remnants of Disaster—what better time to start than now?”

+++

“It was not Hort who did this. That, at least, I *saw*.”

Issues that arose within the Forbidden Library were almost always adjudicated by the chief librarian. Fianos had come to request personnel to aid in tracking down Hort so she could be held accountable for Ulula’s murder. The librarian, however, offered him only this curt assessment.

Naturally, Fianos was perplexed. “Ulula was killed in the reading room. You shouldn’t have been able to see what happened inside.”

“I first saw Hort depart the reading room, then saw Ulula do the same,” the chief librarian replied.

“It can’t be... Then how did this happen...?!”

“I know not. Ask Kukuru.”

“...Kukuru?”

“After exiting the reading room, Ulula returned there with Kukuru. The two of them remained inside until you yourself arrived.”

“No... That can’t be!”

“I do not lie, nor do my eyes ever deceive me. And so, as chief librarian of the Forbidden Library, I command you: release Loux Krystas. Furthermore, I forbid you to harm her so-called ducklings.”

Fianos staggered back a few steps, then raced out of the chief librarian’s office.

He had left Kukuru in charge of Los, since he knew she would be capable of keeping the ancient witch under wraps without hurting her.

Bursting into the bedroom where they waited, he found Kukuru sitting comfortably on the sofa with Los’s head resting in her lap. The Dawn Witch was fast asleep, and the girl was contentedly stroking her long blonde hair.

“Welcome back, Papa.” Kukuru grinned at him, but he didn’t return the smile. “Look, Papa. Isn’t Mama sweet? I had one of the witches in the reading room put her to sleep with a bit of sorcery. Hey, why don’t we go into town, Papa? I’m going to make Mama some new clothes. Won’t that just be wonderful?”

“Do you know who killed Ulula?”

“Ulula said she didn’t want Mama.”

They were talking past each other—and yet Kukuru’s reply seemed strangely pertinent. It disturbed Fianos so much that he had to clench his fists to hold

himself together.

“But Kukuru and Papa *love* Mama, don’t we? And that meant Ulula couldn’t be part of the family anymore.” Kukuru started crying again. “I feel awful for poor little Ulula. Kukuru is so, *so* sad.”

“You...killed her...? You’re the one who—!”

Kukuru put a slender finger to her lips. “Shh... Not so loud. You’ll wake Mama. But...this won’t do at all, Papa. When your daughter is crying, you must comfort her. Cradle her gently in your arms and tell her it’s all going to be okay.”

And if you don’t, Kukuru’s fingers seemed to say, softly tracing a line to Los’s throat.

Fianos froze. He saw Ulula’s lifeless body in his mind’s eye, superimposed over the Dawn Witch’s.

“That’s what family is, isn’t it? You said you would teach me the true meaning of family, didn’t you, Papa? That’s the *contract you made* with Kukuru.” Tears were pouring down her face, and her smile was terrifying.

Fianos knew her name: “The Beloved Child Fastening Shackles of Obsession.”

He had signed a contract with the demon in order to regain his mother’s love. In return for the power to make anyone in the world love him, he agreed to become the demon’s father and provide it with the family it desired.

“This woman is the perfect mother you’ve been searching for these past two centuries, Papa. And now Kukuru has taken such a shine to her, too. Just say the word and Kukuru will make Mama love Papa back. Then the three of us can go off and live a quiet life together somewhere. Papa and Mama can get married and make lots and lots of new sisters and brothers for Kukuru. Our family can get bigger, and then we won’t be lonely anymore.”

That was all Fianos had ever wanted.

For its host, this demon required the body of a child who had died utterly unloved. One day Fianos came across a girl lying in the road, who had been tossed from a moving carriage like a scrap of garbage. It was not such an unusual sight, but there was something about the way she struggled right up until the end, reaching out for the carriage as it trundled away, that reminded him strangely of his own situation. Before he knew it, he had stopped to aid her. At that time, magic did not yet exist in this world, and Fianos knew no healing sorcery. The girl mumbling softly for her mother as her life ebbed away was too miserable a sight for him, however. He did not even know the girl's name, yet still he held her in his arms as she died. Fianos had long known how to summon the Beloved Child Fastening Shackles of Obsession, but remained conflicted about using the power of a demon to obtain the love he desired...



In that moment, though, he made his choice.

The girl was well aware of the demon inside her, and at the same time retained the memories of her human life.

–I will give you the love you desire.

Kukuru smiled through the tears.

–So please, give me a family that will love me in turn.

“You can’t break promises to demons. You know that, don’t you, Papa?”

“...I wanted Ulula to be a part of our family.”

“But Ulula didn’t want that.”

“We just had to convince her! If we were a real family we would’ve made the effort to include everyone, not just pushed her out!”

“...Really?” Kukuru asked him quietly, hanging her head glumly. “I’m sorry, Papa. Kukuru made a mistake...”

Teardrops dripped from her chin onto Los’s cheeks below, and the witch’s eyes fluttered open—those beautiful eyes like gemstones, like a glistening rainbow. Just after Los abandoned him, Fianos had dyed his long hair the seven colors of the rainbow in imitation of those eyes.

“Fianos... Where are...my ducklings...?”

Still adrift between sleep and waking, Los’s words came in fits and starts.

Since the day he made the contract with Kukuru, Fianos had never once used the demon's power for anything other than self-defense. But seeing that even in this moment of crisis Los's concern was for her three charges, he felt the uncontrollable urge to scream.

Ulula is dead, and it's Kukuru's fault—but she did it for me.

"Aren't you worried about *me*, Mama?" he asked, kneeling down by her side and peering into the witch's eyes as she struggled to fight off the sorcerous sleep.

"Where is my little Ludens...?"

"Not here. It's just us. We're the only ones."

Los slowly shook her head.

The gentle rejection hurt Fianos terribly.

This isn't the kind of love I want.

This isn't it.

The ability to manipulate the emotions of others had only made Fianos all the more fixated on finding "true love." He wanted a love that sprung from the human heart and grew over time, not some false emotion created by demonic power.

Even so—

"Kukuru."

"Ye-e-es, Papa?"

"Let's leave this place—together. And find somewhere quiet for the three of us to live."

Fianos stood.

Kukuru clutched Los close to her chest like a favorite doll. “Yes, Papa. Let’s be happy!”

3

This is awful.

I have never, never experienced such humiliation in all my life.

Why? Why why why—? “Why did this have to happen to *me*?! I can’t believe it! I’ll never forgive that cutesy little faker of a demon for this!” cried Ulula—the owl, that is.

Talented witches had no need of a physical form. They were capable of keeping their souls alive after death until they could take possession of a suitable host and provide themselves with a new body. This fact was largely why ancient witches had begun keeping familiars to begin with. They gave the creatures their own name and shared with them their own blood, thereby creating the perfect hosts should the witches themselves ever lose their bodies.

At present, Ulula was inhabiting her familiar, flapping her wings as fast as she could and soaring through the Northern sky. She knew how to fly—many times Ulula had entered her owl’s body just for fun while she was still alive. Fianos had taught her how. In the aftermath of her murder, Ulula was afraid that Kukuru might kill her familiar as well, so she decided to leave the Forbidden Library on the spot. Her destination was the Mage Battalion’s first survey base—the most suitable location she could think of to conceal herself for the time being.

Right about now I expect Kukurū is clutching my body in her arms and wailing, doing her best to excite Father's sympathy.

Just picturing the scene made Ulula's blood boil—but she had even more vexing concerns at present.

"Hnng... Just how far do these blasted things intend on pursuing me?! Give up the chase, you lowly insects!"

It wasn't a metaphor—a mass of bugs blotted out the sky behind her like an inky fog. These were no ordinary insects, of course, but Remnants of Disaster. They did not pursue Ulula out of hunger or self-preservation—they had simply been created to attack any living thing they laid eyes on.

If only I were in my own body, I could burn these pathetic little gnats to a crisp in the blink of an eye—

She climbed higher into the air—then dove precipitously down, plunging into the hollow of a nearby tree. Holding her breath, she waited for the insects to pass by. Their behavioral principle was simple: find, pursue, kill. So the vital thing was to get out of their field of vision. The instant the black cloud of insects could no longer see their target, they scattered, and went fluttering off across the wasteland in search of new prey.

Mere moments after Ulula hid herself inside the tree, the din of beating wings was gone. She breathed a sigh of relief.

Then:

"Huhhh? I could've sworn there was a swarm of petrification bugs here a second ago."

The voice made Ulula's feathers stand on end—it was even more aggravating than the bugs had been. She slowly peeked out of her hiding place...to find a

girl's face peering at her from an incredibly inconsiderate, nay, downright impolite distance.

“Huh?! A bird?!”

Ulula tried to fly away, of course, but the impertinent girl snatched her and hugged her tight, refusing to let go.

“H-Hey you guys, look! This owl! Isn't it Ulula's familiar?!”

“Totally...! You think she flew off when her master was killed?”

“Then, those bugs were after this li'l feather ball? Impressed she made it out alive...”

They're all here, flocking around me. The Dawn Witch's three little ducklings.

Hort stroked Ulula's head with a fingertip, cooing softly. When she scratched behind her ear, the owl narrowed her eyes in pleasure despite herself.

“Aah! She's so cute,” Hort squealed.

“Yeah. And so fluffy... Think she'd be scared if I touched her?”

“Course she would, dumbass! You cast Flagis at her, remember? Poor bird looks tired from all that flyin' around. Hey, want some food? Or water?” Kudo held out some berries for the owl to eat. What Ulula really wanted was meat, but she was hungry enough to make do with this for the time being. Then Kudo poured some water into one of his scaly hands, and Ulula gulped it down.

“Ahh! She's so cute! Like, super, super cute!”

Ulula silently puffed out her chest. She was thoroughly aware of just how cute she was—owl though she might presently be—but nevertheless, such unreserved praise was frankly quite gratifying.

Perhaps I should show these three dolts how beautiful I look while preening

my feathers, before I depart, Ulula thought. She spread out her magnificent wings and quickly set about grooming them with her beak. Hort couldn't contain her glee.

Yes, yes, very good. More rejoicing.

Just then, a most unwelcome sight flew into Ulula's field of vision.

An insect.

A single insect, so small that it barely stood out against the skin of Hort's arm. Ulula drew in a breath to cry out even as the creature bit down.

"Ouch...!" Hort muttered.

"Cut off the arm!" Ulula screamed. All eyes turned to her—but then Hort's arm started to change.

To petrify.

It would spread out from the bite at ferocious speed, first hardening every inch of skin on her body. Once she was unable to move, it would progress to her muscles, bones, and internal organs, turning them all to stone.

There were countless lifelike "statues" created by these insects all across the North. The name of the corresponding demon was already known, which could be used to keep its power at bay and dispel the effect—but it was also well known to all who went north that once the petrification had reached a person's internal organs, returning their body to flesh would yield nothing but a fresh corpse.

Total petrification meant death, plain and simple.

It took Hort a moment or two to realize what Ulula's scream meant, but then she grabbed herself by the bicep. A quick incantation, a flash—and fresh blood

spurted from the stump as her severed arm fell to the ground, becoming completely petrified within seconds. It could hardly be called an ideal outcome, however, as the blood gushing from Hort's arm was only marginally less life-threatening than the bite.

"Saybil! Hold out yer hand!" Kudo thrust out his left hand, and Saybil gripped it even as Kudo laid his right on Hort's upper arm. He used no incantation, but a faint light glowed from Kudo's palm, and before their eyes Hort's arm began to regenerate. Once it was complete down to her fingertips, the three of them finally paused for breath.

"W-Waaaah! I just grew a new aaaarm! More importantly, the old one's right there! There's a stone version of my arm lying on the ground!" Hort shouted, trembling at the sight of her freshly-regenerated arm, then picked the stone one up off the ground and started shouting all over again. "Wh-Whoa! I can see all the details of the muscles and everything...!"

"You got nerves of steel or what?! You almost fuckin' died! If Saybil hadn'ta been here, I prob'ly wouldn'ta been able to give you fingers! How the hell you let that thing bite you, anyway?! Where's your talisman?!"

"Ummm, well... I was worried Ulula might get bitten, so I..."

With a start, Ulula looked down to see a talisman tied to her foot. She couldn't help but scold Hort. "Are you a complete imbecile?! Even a little chick like you must know that when you die, that's the end!! Assuming you can't turn yourself into a spirit, then poof, you're gone!!"

Ulula flew at Hort's face and pecked her hard in the forehead. Hort struggled to fend her off, but then froze and looked up at the owl out of tear-filled eyes.

"W-Wait a sec! You can talk?! This owl *did* just talk, didn't it?! I'm not

imagining things?!”

“Wow, so familiars can talk... I’m starting to want one myself,” said Saybil.

“Familiars can’t talk, their masters just come to understand what they’re saying! This is *very* basic knowledge, and I’ll thank you not to make me go over it! If you actually stopped to *think* for a moment you would surely realize that my soul is simply inside my familiar at present!”

“S-Sorry...! Ow, ow...!” Saybil curled his tall frame into a tiny ball as Ulula transferred her vitriolic attack to him.

Finally she flew over to Kudo and used his head as a perch, puffing out her chest with an out-of-breath *Hmph*. “Well, enough of that. I have no idea what you three are doing here, but there should be an old church nearby. I shall guide you there.”

“Huh? You mean the first survey base?” asked Saybil.

Ulula snapped her beak shut and turned emphatically away from him. “If you know the place already then there’s absolutely no need to repeat its name in my presence now hurry up and take me there you blockhead!” she squawked, pecking Saybil one last time on the forehead.

4

“Now there’s a surprise. When you went out to look for petrification bugs, I never thought you’d bring back a possessed familiar.”

Despite his words, Raul didn’t appear surprised in the slightest.

“It’s a little confusing having Ulula and Raul in the same place,” Saybil

muttered. “Like, Raulula...? I have a feeling I’m gonna get mixed up...”

Ulula spread her wings in agreement. “I have been thinking the same thing for some time now. A name change, if you please.”

“Shall we call you Ully, then?” asked Raul.

“You know that’s not what I meant! I won’t tolerate it!”

“You can call me Rally if you like.”

“Are you making fun of me?!”

“Oh dear, was it that obvious?”

“You’re so terribly irritating!” Ulula spread her wings to fly off, but Raul gently took hold of her beak. No matter how she struggled, he wouldn’t let go—smiling all the while.

“This guy’s kinda scary when he smiles, huh...” Kudo murmured.

“I wonder why,” Saybil said. “It’s weird, he’s always so polite and calm, but...”

“I know why,” Hort put in. “He’s got, like, the same smell about him I do...!”

“In any case.” Raul’s tone was suddenly serious.

He released Ulula’s beak, but on seeing his expression, she protested no further.

Raul continued. “What happened? Your father caused quite the scene at the Library. He’s under the impression that Hort is the one who killed you. I assume that isn’t the case?”

“Of course not. Father can be so hopelessly foolish at times. I mean, honestly! I could *never* be killed by the likes of Hort!”

“Then who did kill you? And why?”

"I told Kukurū I had no need of a new mother, and she suddenly stabbed me. And after I had gone all the way back to the reading room with her because she said she had a secret to tell me!"

Kudo cocked his head at her choice of words. "You're talkin' about gettin' killed here, but you make it sound like no big deal..."

"Naturally," Ulula replied, lightly opening and closing her wings. "All being slain means is that the first flesh I inhabited is gone. Now I simply have to find my next body."

"So we didn't need to run away after all...?" Hort asked.

"Father clearly would have killed you if you hadn't run! He gets ever so scary when he's angry."

"But I'm not the one who murdered you!"

"I'm glad you're safe and sound, Ulula," said Saybil. "Now, if you'll just attest to the fact that it wasn't Hort who attacked you, we can go back to the Forbidden Library whenever we like, right?"

"Oh, damn! Totally!"

"But since we've come all this way... I might like to stay and investigate a bit longer."

"Are you mumbling in your sleep? Listen, will you? I was murdered by Kukurū. Her aim is to take your precious professor as her mother. Do you think I was the only thing standing in her way? Surely you can't be under the impression it was pure coincidence that the blame fell on you?"

Saybil pondered her words. "Hmm... So we're in Kukurū's way, too."

"Can't you just go flying to Fianos an' tell him this is all some plot Kukurū

cooked up? Then she'll get banished or executed or somethin', and this whole damn thing'll be over."

"I grow weary of this. Did you truly fail to notice?"

"Hanh?"

"That Kukuru isn't human. She's a demon Father summoned. She cannot be banished or executed—or then Father wouldn't be able to access her power any longer! The best we can hope for is to tell her she's naughty and give her a little slap on the wrist. She adores being disciplined, though, so that might not amount to much of a punishment."

"Huh? Sorry, that was so much information, I couldn't really follow."

"But, I mean, she totally looked like a normal p...!" Hort stopped mid-sentence, realizing that the chief librarian of the Forbidden Library was himself a demon in human form.

They do exist, then, she thought. Demons who live like humans, blending into society just like that.

Kudo beat his tail against the floor in irritation. "If someone summons a demon, then it's bound by a contract, right? So all Fianos hasta do is order it not to attack us, and we're good."

"Demons are terribly good at distorting humans' orders and finding ways to outwit them—Kukuru in particular. Even if Father ordered her not to kill you, some complete stranger might pop up and murder you the very next day." Ulula flapped her wings, then resettled herself on Kudo's head. "Unless Kukuru gives up on making Loux Krystas her mother, she'll keep coming after you. Although, should Loux Krystas decide to settle down and accept her new role, I expect that would mollify the demon."

“Professor Los becoming Kukurū’s mother...means marrying Fianos... Right?”

“Of course.”

“That’s bad...” muttered Saybil. “Professor Los might marry Fianos just to protect us. If that happened, I wonder...if her and Fianos would...kiss and stuff...?”

There was a dark, sludgelike aura oozing from Saybil’s every pore that made Hort shrink back with an involuntary *Eek!* She could feel it pouring out of him like his mana used to before he learned to control it.

“C-Calm down, Sayb! It’s okay, it’s fine! We’ll just go back to the Library and tell Professor Los we’re fine out here, and she doesn’t need to—”

“Shh! Quiet!” Raul had moved to the window some time ago and stood staring out of it, and now he finally silenced them with a sharp hiss.

“I-Is there something out there?” Hort asked uneasily.

Raul nodded in silence, his eyes fixed on a single point. “With the power of our wards, it shouldn’t be able to detect us, but...it clearly knows we’re in here.”

Following Raul’s lead, the three mages darted to the window. At that moment, countless human faces appeared on the other side of the pane, and Hort and Kudo only barely managed to swallow the screams that welled up in their throats.

Saybil leaned in closer, trying to get a better look at the faces, and discovered they belonged to human heads growing from some kind of round body.

“What is that thing... It’s like there are people’s heads...growing out of an insect’s belly...?”

“Sayb, how can you stand to look?!”

“I think I saw this creature in the book...!” Saybil walked over to the table and opened the compendium of Remnants of Disaster he had brought with him when they left the Library. “‘The head-harvesting ball spider.’ A Remnant of Disaster that takes the form of a spider and collects human heads. Any heads severed by the creature are taken into its spherical abdomen and—”

Saybil hesitated for a moment. He was far from emotionally intelligent, but even he wasn’t immune to the bone-shaking terror of the next few words lined up so clinically on the page.

“—and live on as such, existing only from the neck up...”

“What? You’ve gotta be kidding me, Sayb!”

“Then all those faces comin’ outta that spider’s belly are...!”

Alive. Suffering.

Hort and Kudo rushed back to the window and looked intently at the faces growing from the creature’s stomach. Hollow eyes, slack mouths... They had no animating vitality, but they did appear to be living.

“Th-This is fucked! What’s a thing like that doing here...?! I thought the area around the Forbidden Library was s’posed ta be relatively safe?!”

“I’m surprised as well. The Mage Battalion has been hunting that particular Remnant of Disaster for at least a year now.”

“Hunting... Meaning you hadn’t found it yet?”

“The thing is cautious and quick to flee. It only shows itself to prey it can defeat without question.”

“So was it after Ulula? Those petrification bugs were chasing her, too, after all.”

“I am not ‘prey it can defeat without question,’ I’ll have you know,” Ulula protested.

“But you’re just a cute little owl right now!” Hort countered, squeezing Ulula’s beak. The owl flapped and struggled its way free, then flew up into the rafters of the old church.

“So what do we do? Wait here until it gives up?”

“No.” Raul left the window and crossed to a wardrobe in the corner. He opened it and began quickly putting on the armor that hung inside.

“R-Raul?”

“We can’t return to the Forbidden Library with that thing staking out the church. Not to mention that it’ll kill any messenger the Library might send.”

“Huh?!”

“Remember the feud between the support crew and our mess sergeant? Which started when one of the crew got drunk and called a Remnant of Disaster into the camp as a stupid prank?”

“I remember!” Hort shouted. “That terrible food!”

“This is the very Remnant of Disaster that came into camp and killed our people that night. Ten elite mage troopers, handpicked by Commander Amnir herself—for all its cowardice, the creature is strong.”

Raul was already done suiting up by the time he had finished this explanation. He had even fixed the barding on his horse half without aid; it was clearly specially made for him, but such expeditious preparation nonetheless required a deft hand.

“Raul, are you really going to fight that thing?”

“Yes. This is my *serious* armor.”

“So... Like...” Hort blinked a few times. “Even though it’s so strong...we’re going to be the ones to kill it?”

“That’s the idea... Why, are you frightened?” asked Raul, cocking his head.

“We ain’t scareda that stupid creepy-crawly! Hort’s magic’ll blow it away in one go!”

“Y-Yeah! And even if we do get hurt, Kudo can heal us on the spot! Plus, we’ve got Sayb’s magic potions! It’ll be a breeze! Right, Sayb?!”

“Forty-seven.”

“Huh?”

Saybil was still at the window. At his words, the others turned to look at him.

“That’s the number of heads growing out of that spider’s stomach. If we kill it, forty-seven people will die.”

“You’re right,” said Raul. “That is why we were so desperate to find it...and why we can’t kill it a moment too soon.” There was a tension in his normally calm voice.

Hort clenched her fists, and Kudo’s scales turned a cold azure.

“Yeah... They must be in hell right now.”

“I’d rather die than be kept alive like that.”

“But what if we could save them?” Saybil insisted.

“Save...those people?” asked Raul.

“Kudo, you just regrew Hort’s arm in a second flat, didn’t you? Before she had much time to bleed, or even feel any pain.”

“Saybil... Don’t try’n tell me you’re...”

Saybil looked Kudo straight in the eye. “How long do you think a person’s head stays ‘alive’...after you cut it off?”

5

Kudo had learned some basic medicine when he worked at the clinic in the Witch’s Village, and some of the precious books in Zero’s collection contained accounts of witches who had stained their hands with inhumane human experimentation. According to one: “Humans are capable of surviving as heads alone.” And another: “People do not pass so quickly into spirit form, even when their heads are severed.”

All of which had led Kudo to this conclusion:

“Five minutes. Once someone’s been decapitated, it takes about five minutes for ‘em to become a spirit. After that, you can jam the spirit back into the body, but all you’ll get is an animated corpse. As of now, there ain’t no way to bring the dead back to life.”

“Five minutes?! That long?!”

“It said so in some book I read, that’s all! The doc at the clinic talked about blood flow an’ providing oxygen to the somethin’-or-other... But for us mages, it basically means that if someone gets their head cut off, we can bring ‘em back to life within five minutes. That’s *if* you can perfectly regenerate their body, ‘course.”

“And can you, Kudo?” Saybil asked quietly.

Kudo rapped his tail against the floorboards. “How the hell should I know?! I never tried it before! I’d be out of mana just from doin’ Hort’s arm if you hadn’t been here to give me more!”

“Let’s test it, then. We’ll start by saving one person. Raul?”

“Hmm... It might be worth trying. But it’ll require precise coordination. One of us will need to sever a head attached to the spider’s body and another will need to get the head to Kudo—while the other will have to act as bait, drawing the creature’s attacks.”

They all exchanged fleeting glances.

“I suppose I need to focus on providing mana to Kudo...”

“Then I’ll take care of the severing...” Hort looked up to the rafters. “Ulula, are you strong enough to carry a human head?”

“A typical owl would perhaps be incapable of doing so. But Ulula is a familiar, and *I* am an exceptionally talented witch, so this body is *much* stronger than the average owl’s.”

“Kay, then you’re in charge of bringing the head to Kudo.”

“Hm? Why, exactly? For what purpose? What reason could I possibly have to aid you? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“What reas...? I mean, if this works, everyone at the Forbidden Library will make a *huge* fuss over you. You’ll get all the attention in the world!”

Ulula thought for a moment, then glided lightly down and alit on Kudo’s head. “I *suppose* I can assist you, then!”

“So as for the bait...”

No one wanted to say it out loud, but everyone’s gaze naturally turned to

Raul's legs—the powerful legs of a horse.

Raul looked around at the strained expressions on the young mages' faces and smiled. "Don't worry. I'm a fast runner."

+++

—We'll start by saving one person.

To test whether they even could.

Hort planned to use the Chapter of Harvest, Verse Three—Lamant, the branch-feller. It was magic originally created to aid in harvesting crops, releasing a blade of wind in a wide arc, and it was the same spell Hort had used to sever her own arm after the petrification bug bit her. For Hort, who could cast even Flagis without an incantation, it was no trouble to cast Lamant silently and in quick succession. And with Saybil's elixirs on hand, she didn't need to worry about running out of mana.

Hort would sever one of the heads from the spider's body, which Ulula would then retrieve and bring to Kudo for immediate regeneration. It remained unclear whether a whole human body could actually be regenerated from just a head—but it was worth a shot.

"I'll leave first, and charge directly away from the church," Raul began. "The spider should turn its back on you. Just sever whichever head will be easiest to target, Hort."

"Leave it to me! I totally feel like I've got this in the bag already!"

"That's reassuring to hear." The gentle smile quickly disappeared from Raul's

face as he lowered his visor. An imposing aura emanated from every inch of his black-armored frame. “I go on three.

“One—!”

Raul crouched low, his horseshoes scraping at the floor.

“Two—!”

Kudo and Saybil stood on either side of the church’s double doors.

“Three!”

On “Three” they pushed open the doors, and Raul sprang forward with a powerful leap. Hort and Ulula shot out after him.

“Okay—one to start with!” Hort waved her hand, and a blade of wind sliced through the air toward the spider. She severed one of the heads, and it arced through the air with a spurt of blood. Ulula swooped down and caught it midair, then deftly dropped it into Kudo’s waiting arms.

“Let’s do this, Saybil!”

“Ready when you are!”

Kudo poured all his mana into casting Chordia on the severed head in his hands. Where a moment ago blood had gushed from its neck, bones now began to grow. Muscle regenerated, then skin formed, and in mere moments it had taken on human form. Kudo staggered back and fell to his knees under the weight of the person now in his arms.

“We did it, Kudo! He’s alive!”

“...Hort, it works! Keep going!” Kudo shouted, swallowing his relief before it could wash over him and refocusing on the task at hand.

Saybil stepped away from Kudo for a moment to drag the unconscious man

into the church.

“Hurry up Saybil, next one’s comin’!”

“R-Right! ...But man, look at Raul go. That thing will never be able to catch him...”

Raul couldn’t just run wildly from the head-harvesting ball spider—he had to remain within range of Hort’s magic, while calculating his path to keep the creature itself facing away from Hort. Perhaps due to the weight of all the heads it had gathered, the spider itself wasn’t all that quick on its feet.

Now all that’s left is to get through the job, thought Saybil.

Five were free of the spider, then ten. Saybil’s arms started to ache from dragging their unconscious bodies into the church.

We might’ve given this part a little more thought. Saybil would never run out of mana, but that didn’t mean he didn’t get tired...and the same went for the others. Ulula in particular had to be exhausted from catching, carrying, and delivering so many heads.

And just after they had rescued their thirtieth victim—

“Ah—!”

There came a tiny cry from up above as the severed head Ulula had been carrying slipped silently from her grasp. She had been flying at some altitude; the skull was sure to break if it hit the rocks below.

“No—no, no, no! You can’t fall!”

Ulula beat her wings and went into a precipitous dive, narrowly managing to grab the head mere inches above the ground. She was going too fast to pull up, though, and it was all she could do to cushion the head with her body as it

impacted the hard earth.

Bird bones are terribly brittle. Her wings would never catch the wind again.

But there are still fifteen or sixteen more heads...

“Wh...” *What do we do?!* Before Saybil could even get the words out, Kudo had made the call:

“Hort! Sever the rest of them!”

“Huh?! Why?!”

“Just do it! You can, can’t you?!”

“Y...Yes!”

When Kudo told her to do something, Hort just did it. There was a trust between them... A resolve to believe in each other, even if they sometimes screwed up.

Hort crushed one of Saybil’s elixirs in her fist and set her feet firmly in the dirt, glaring at her target. “Chapter of Harvest, Verse Three—Lamant! Full strength! Heed this call by the power of my name—Hort!”

A sudden gust of wind, and the spider was completely obscured in a mist of blood.

—Lizard. There is a spell I wish to teach you.

Zero had given Kudo the parchment just before they left her village.

—You will not find it in your textbook. But if you truly wish to save the lives of

all you come across, there will no doubt come a time when you require it.

She had given him the parchment ever so casually, and Kudo had accepted it much the same way. He hadn't even mastered all the spells in their school textbook, so he figured there was no chance he could activate this *other* magic.

And yet...

—The spell is a little trying...but the demon involved is a tender sort. Pray hard, and I'm sure it will grant you its power, even if you are not quite ready.

Kudo remembered the way Zero had smiled at him as she said those words.

Then now's the time to pray, he thought. Please. I'm begging you, just let this work.

Amid the heavy metallic tang hanging in the air, Kudo shouted the incantation. *"Deiares Naires Viedres Slak!* Descend from the glittering wings of the white serpent! O countless winds of life, blow across the land as far as my breath might reach! Grant reprieve from all death!"

Kudo hated incantations, and strove to learn to use all his spells without them. But in that moment, he had no reservations, felt no embarrassment at reciting the words. He spread his arms then moved them in a wide circle, finally fixing one hand low and turning the other up to the sky. The lines he traced in the air glowed with a faint light, then transformed into two shimmering serpents that entwined themselves around each other and drew their heads close. As broad wings erupted from their backs, Kudo shrugged off his robe and focused all the power he had into the spell.

“Chapter of Protection, Page Seven—Medicalvia! Heed this call by the power of my name—Kudo!”

The platinum serpents raced through the air, borne on Kudo’s healing wind, and circled the severed heads, which began to regenerate. The snakes also brushed against Ulula, who awoke and looked up in astonishment at the creatures of light drifting calmly through the gray sky above. Only a few seconds had passed between Hort severing the remaining heads and Kudo casting Medicalvia—but it felt like time itself had stopped.

Kudo dropped to a sitting position on the ground, completely exhausted.

Hort snapped back to reality and crushed another elixir in her fist. “I’m going to finish it off! Raul, get away from—”

“Ghiiiiiih!”

Hort’s voice was drowned out by an earsplitting howl from the head-harvesting ball spider. The creature crouched low—then leapt. With no more heads weighing it down, the spider was much swifter now. Raul, on the other hand, had been running nonstop, and was clearly low on stamina. When the thing took to the air, he faltered, and when it landed right in front of him, he reared in surprise. The spider slashed at the beastfallen with a limb like a great scythe, cutting off one of his forelegs at the knee. Unable to stand, Raul collapsed to the ground, and the head-harvesting ball spider closed in, waving its scythe-like appendages.

“Flagis!” Hort screamed.

But the blazing snakes wouldn’t reach the spider before its blades found Raul. Worse still, the spider was swinging its limbs vertically, rather than horizontally.

If it just cut off his head, we’d have five minutes to revive him, but if it slices

his head to bits—

“No, I’m not gonna make it in time! Raul!”

A flash of light.

Crimson blood filled the air.

It wasn’t Raul’s head, however, but the forelimbs of the head-harvesting ball spider that fell severed to the ground. Hort’s Flagis struck a moment later, and the Remnant of Disaster was engulfed in flame. It ran, shrieking in pain, black smoke rising from its body. Another flash of light, and the creature fell, split cleanly in two. A small black silhouette stood atop the bloody halves of its body.

No—that’s not just a silhouette. It really is black.

“What is that...?”

Kudo rubbed his eyes, as if he doubted what they showed him. After confirming that Saybil, standing beside him, looked perfectly normal, he turned back to give the shadow another look. It was shaped like a person, and appeared to be wearing a dress. But strangest of all was the massive staff it held, which loomed over the shadow’s tiny frame. The staff itself was not black—it was the color of wood.

“...Ludens?” Saybil murmured.

“Y...You’re right! It’s Ludens!”

A massive staff with colorful ribbons and a jet-black orb embedded in its tip—there was no mistaking the Staff of Ludens.

But then, doesn’t that mean...

“Wait, so... Is the Staff of Ludens...holding *itself* right now?” Kudo, still sitting on the ground in an exhausted puddle, pointed a trembling finger at the

shadowy form.

It slowly raised a finger in return, then an arm, and produced a string of black letters in the air. “BINGO!”

Saybil ran over to the Staff of Ludens. “Wh-What’s going on?! Where’s Professor Los? Why did you come on your own...?!”

Saybil had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

And sure enough, the Staff of Ludens drew more letters in the air by way of reply:

“MY WITCH HAS BEEN KIDNAPPED.”





Chapter Five



No one bothered to ask who might have done such a thing. Ulula had been killed, Saybil, Hort, and Kudo had been driven out of the library, and now the Staff of Ludens was here without its master.

Kukuru and Fianos had kidnapped Los and taken away her staff, the only means she had of resisting them.

“Wait a minute... You can, like, walk on your own, Ludens...?” Hort asked, hesitantly reaching out to touch the black Los-shaped mass before them. It wobbled at her touch, rippling like the surface of a pond. “Whoaaa... That feels *really* weird... I could keep poking it forever...!”

“Hmm... I mean, we’ve seen it turn into scythes and pots and stuff before. Feels like transforming itself into a human and carrying itself around shouldn’t come as *that* much of a surprise...”

“No freakin’ way! Professor Los never said a word about that! Hey, if you can carry yerself around, what’s the point of contractin’ with a witch, anyway?!”

“I ONLY LEARNED HOW YESTERDAY,” came the response.

“Just like that?!”

“MY WITCH IS IN DANGER.”

“W-Wow, great job, Ludens! I’m, like, kinda moved!” exclaimed Hort.

“So Ludens... Yesterday you figured out how to walk, and then you came straight here?” asked Saybil. “How’d you know where we were?”

“THE THOUSAND-EYED SENTINEL OF TEN THOUSAND LEAGUES.”

“Umm... You mean the chief librarian?”

Ludens nodded.

Saybil looked over at Raul. “So the chief librarian knows we’re here, then?”

“Commander Amnir should also be aware of our location. The present situation will most likely have been relayed to her as well, and I expect carriages will arrive in short order to escort you back to the Library.”

Raul looked over the forty-seven people they had rescued from the spider, lined up on the beds inside the church. As the first survey base of the Mage Battalion, the building had enough beds to sustain a small garrison—twenty-five arranged against either wall. Fifty beds in total meant there were just enough for all the survivors plus the three mages to get some sleep. It was almost too good to be true. Raul had his own special bed, of course, and Ulula the owl slept in a comfy little spot Hort had prepared for her.

The provisions on hand weren’t exactly sumptuous, but there was enough for everyone; they would be able to hold out until the Mage Battalion came for them.

“So the plan is to go back to the Forbidden Library and ask the chief librarian where Professor Los is, then save her with the help of the Mage Battalion... Right?”

“Well, now, there’s a surprise. I expected something more along the lines of, ‘We’re gonna go and save her right now all by ourselves!’” said Raul.

“Why, because I accepted Ulula’s duel?”

“Sent a shockwave through the Battalion.”

Raul chuckled, and Saybil felt somewhat embarrassed at how reckless he had been.

“But in terms of shockwaves, isn’t this going to be a way bigger deal? I mean, we saved a whole forty-seven people from that spider!” Hort puffed out her chest proudly.

Raul smiled and nodded, but then his expression clouded. “I am a little concerned, though... These people experienced something far worse than death, and their suffering went on for so long. They’re all sleeping now, but when they awake, we don’t know how they’re going to react to all this...”

“Won’t they just be happy?” was a question on nobody’s lips. Saybil knew full well there were some memories that could eat you alive. The moment these people woke up, there would be confusion, and some might even choose to end it all.

“...We could help them all forget, couldn’t we? The painful memories, I mean.”

“Well, yes. I believe there is a witch at the Forbidden Library who can manipulate memory.”

“Then let’s just keep ’em asleep until we get back there,” said Kudo lightly. “Put ’em to sleep with magic, erase their memories while they’re out, and then they can wake up thinkin’ they just had some terrible nightmare.”

“If it were possible, yes, that would be ideal.”

“Whaddaya mean, ‘if’?”

“There’s more than one head-harvesting ball spider out there. I’m sure many would like to retain the memory of what happened to them, of what it was like after their head was taken. Memory seals are by no means perfect, and some

suddenly recall their pasts regardless. In which case, we must find a way to confront the issue *without* erasing these people's memories."

"What, you mean you *want* 'em to remember all this? We don't even know if they'll be able to talk once they wake up! If that's your plan, I ain't handin' a single one of 'em over to the Mage Battalion. I protect my patients."

Kudo's tone was aggressive, but Raul just nodded calmly. "Of course. So let's prolong their sleep while we wait. Then we can erase their memories—and explain to them what happened. Any who are brave enough to remember can then elect to do so, with certain precautions in place. Will you agree to assist the Mage Battalion under those conditions?"

"...Assist?" Kudo repeated.

"You don't quite seem to understand what you've done, Kudo."

"I got no idea what you're tryin'a say, so just spit it out!" Kudo's tail swished from side to side in irritation.

Raul looked him dead in the eyes. "The magic you used, from page seven of the Chapter of Protection, constitutes the final passage from the Chapter of Protection in the forbidden *Grimoire of Zero*. At present, that is the most powerful restoration magic in existence."

"Wha?!"

It went without saying that Saybil and Hort would be surprised to hear this, but even Kudo was stunned by the revelation. His jaw dropped, and for a while it seemed he had completely forgotten how to close his mouth.

"Th-That totally makes sense, though, right?! I mean, I was a little confused since that spell wasn't in our textbook, but...it was from the *Grimoire of Zero*?! How come you could cast it, Kudo?!"

“I don’t freakin’ know! Professor Zero jus’ gave me the incantation on a piece a paper and told me it was a little tough, but I might be able ta pull it off if I prayed!”

“B-But that’s amazing! Like, all the magic in the *Grimoire* is so advanced...!”

“As far as I’m aware, the only people in the world capable of using that particular spell are Zero, the very inventor of magic, Faeria, the Healing Saint of Akdios, and Headmaster Albus of the Academy of Magic.”

“W-Whoaaa! You’re a genius! I’m standing next to a genius!”

“A-Awesome... I’m feeling kinda pumped up...”

Sandwiched between Hort, who was visibly bubbling with excitement, and Saybil, who was trembling behind his usual deadpan expression, Kudo was more shaken than anyone.

Raul threw back his head and laughed. “It really is something. I imagine it would still be difficult for you to use reliably, though. That’s probably what Zero meant about praying, don’t you think?”

“Wh-What do you mean?”

“The demon that oversees the Chapter of Protection is kind. On a whim, it might even aid a young girl ignorant of both sorcery and magic who prayed from the bottom of her heart for someone’s sickness to be healed. The Church has long referred to such events as miracles—”

Miracles, sorcery, magic—in essence they were all the same. Offering something in exchange for invoking the powers of a demon.

“I expect you prayed so sincerely for the magic to succeed that you manifested a miracle, Kudo. And you made it work brilliantly. You may yet be inexperienced as a mage, but you clearly have exceptional spirit. Not everyone

can care so deeply about the lives of others. In our world, people's lives are like scraps of paper, scattered by famine, war, the caprices of the powerful—but you.” Here Raul poked Kudo lightly in the chest. “You care more about strangers than anyone else in this world. People you’ve never met, who aren’t your lovers, who aren’t your family, people whose names you’ll never even know.”

“Th-That’s not what I...! You make it sound like charity or somethin’! That ain’t me at all quit it you’re grossin’ me out!”

“I don’t know, I get what Raul’s saying,” Saybil chimed in. “You’re always putting your life on the line to save people, regardless of who they are.”

“Totally! It’s like, you automatically go into rescue mode as soon as someone gets hurt! Enemies, friends, whoever!”

“Cut it out! It ain’t like that! / ain’t!” Kudo’s scales blushed a deep red, and he jumped into one of the empty beds to escape the conversation. “I’m tired! Goin’ ta bed! End of conversation!”

“Man, I sure am hungry!” Hort jumped up from her chair. “When’s the escort getting here... Like, tomorrow? Let’s rest up and get some food in while we wait!”

Watching Hort dash off to ransack the kitchen, Saybil sighed. *Kudo and Hort really were incredible today. Her precision in slicing the heads from that spider’s body was out of this world... And Kudo, pulling off the highest-level protection spell there is.*

Saybil found himself looking down at his own hands. *I’m still so inexperienced. I haven’t caught up to either of them at all. Just the opposite, in fact—I feel like the gap is only getting wider.*

“Listen, Sayb,” Raul’s voice broke in on his thoughts. “Do you know why the

Mage Battalion lost ten men to one of those spiders, while the five of us were able to take this one out so easily?”

“Huh? Umm... Because it took you guys by surprise the first time?”

“Sure, that was a big part of it. But—and this is just speculation—I think head-harvesting ball spiders bear as many souls as the heads they capture. When it attacked the Battalion, we dealt it countless fatal blows, but it got right back up every time.”

“Then...we were only able to kill it because we severed all the heads first...?”

Raul nodded. “Wards are capable of keeping them at bay, but I suspect that’s the only way to kill them. Otherwise I wouldn’t have accepted the absurd task of running from that spider for as long as it took to sever forty-seven heads... Not simply to save those people.”

“O-Of course not...”

“At first, I had intended to just kill it forty-eight times over. Until all the heads were dead. That was before you suggested saving them, of course.”

“Uh... Are you trying to praise me?” Saybil asked hesitantly. There was something about Raul’s words that made him uncomfortable.

“Well now, let me see...” Raul replied in a flat tone, his answer deliberately vague.

“It’s okay. I know this plan wouldn’t have worked if I hadn’t been here to provide Hort and Kudo with mana. I know I was useful.”

“And yet you still seem dejected.”

“No, it’s just...” Saybil looked down at the floor. “My mana, my research into magic potions and elixirs... That all comes from my father. He planned a way to

give me this much mana, and that's exactly how it turned out. With my research, too, all I'm doing is following in his footsteps, taking up his mantle."

"Aha... And?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, look. All research into magic involves following in Zero's footsteps. But is there some problem with that?"

"...No? That's not a problem... Is it...?"

"Of course not. Good, we're on the same page. And as for your mana, well... I expect that can just be considered an innate talent..." Raul looked down at his lower half, at his beautiful horse's body. "I can run really, really fast, right?"

"Yes. Really, *really* fast."

"I'm proud of that fact. Your average, everyday knight will never outpace me, and I've got more stamina than any wild horse. And sure, that's because I'm a beastfallen, but...doesn't it strike you as kind of odd? The idea that I'm 'only' fast because I'm a beastfallen, so that ability isn't even really 'mine'?"

"...You're right." Saybil's face crinkled into a clumsy smile. "That really is an extremely odd way to think about things."

2

While they waited for the escort unit to arrive at the first survey base, Saybil and the others ended up going ahead with their planned investigation into the Remnants of Disaster.

Ulula went along with them, complaining all the while, and flying into a rage

when Hort remarked that it was “like we’ve gotten our own familiar.” But, as a witch with a few years on the young mages, she also taught them quite a lot.

“You three wish to retrieve your precious professor, and I wish to get Father back and give Kukurū what for. I’d like to find a new body while I’m at it—perhaps I could take hers? In any event, since my current form is inconvenient in all sorts of ways, you three *do* agree to take responsibility for your actions and aid me in my plan, don’t you? Well?”

By now, Ulula’s manner of speaking failed to annoy any of them. They recalled how she had so desperately flown back and forth carrying heads to Kudo, and how she hadn’t hesitated to protect the one she dropped at the cost of her own fragile body. Now that they knew her true nature, there didn’t seem to be much difference between Ulula’s domineering attitude and Kudo’s sharp tongue.

“I’d like to study your sorcery, Ulula. I might be able to apply it to my own research into magic potions.”

“I don’t particularly mind, but you’ll teach me magic in return?”

“Actually, the Academy forbids that... You’d need to attend the school...”

Ulula turned her owlish eyes on Saybil in astonishment. “They forbid it?”

“Yes. Disseminating magical knowledge to outsiders is forbidden by blood contract... If you break the terms, you can never again call on the power of demons.”

“...Hmm.” Ulula seemed to be pondering something. “Then one would fail to gain admittance to the Academy if one mentioned wanting to teach magic to others on the application?”

“Hmm... Not necessarily...? There’s the blood contract, but...I suppose

someone might matriculate because they wanted to teach someone else, with the knowledge that they themselves ultimately wouldn't be able to use magic anymore."

"Nailed it!" Hort called out, as if Saybil had said exactly what she'd been thinking. "I totally thought the same thing! Like, with the blood contract as it's written, knowledge of magic will totally trickle out. As soon as I got into the Academy, I asked one of the professors if the blood contract actually meant anything, and she said it was just set up so they'd know who was out there learning about magic! Like, it's all a trap to ferret out people who are interested in the Academy of Magic!"

"Huh? You mean someone could still get into the Academy if they said outright that they planned on teaching magic to other people?"

"I hear a lot of disciples of witches and sorcerers get turned down. The Academy isn't ready to teach magic to people they might not be able to control afterward. Like, we almost got expelled for being too talented, you know?"

"Mm-hmm, makes sense."

"I think the Academy just doesn't really have its admissions process together yet. But maybe if the three of us really do grow into great mages, they'll feel more ready to accept students who might be a teensy bit dangerous, and then the overall quality of the student body will improve...? Professor Zero's back to full power, after all. But yeah, if someone like Ulula came to take the entrance exam, Headmaster Albus'd probably shoot her down on the spot."

Saybil tried to imagine the look on Albus's face when she picked up Ulula's application, and saw the headmaster shouting, "Nope! No way! Can't do it!" He deftly managed to chuckle to himself despite his expressionless face.

“Dude... That laugh is super frikkin’ creepy...”

“For real? Sorry.”

“Hey Ulula, how come your feathers are all puffed out?”

“Do I need a reason? I simply felt like being fluffy, that’s all. Am I obliged to explain myself to you at every turn?”

“No, but it’s super-duper cute and I *really* wanna hug you!”

For Hort, the gap between *wanting to do something* and *going ahead and doing it* was essentially nonexistent.

As Ulula snuggled into Hort’s chest, fluffing her feathers contentedly, she muttered, “Hmph, I see, I see... So my abundance of talent was the issue, then. Disciples of famous sorcerers can naturally be quite dangerous, I admit...”

+++

That night, the escort from the Forbidden Library arrived.

Though it could hardly be called a simple escort—

“Your Highness! You came all this way?”

As the escort unit approached the church, torches in hand, Raul was shocked to see who led them. Commander Amnir strode at the head of twenty or so of the Mage Battalion’s elites—with most of the Battalion’s main fighting force behind them.

“All right people, get the survivors into the carriages on the double. Raul, thank you for protecting the children.”

“Well, frankly, they had no need of my protection. You saw, I assume? These little ones are strong.”

Amnir nodded. “I saw. Through the chief librarian’s eyes.”

She turned then and walked over to Saybil and the others, who were standing around not exactly knowing what to do.

“Thank you. I offer you my utmost gratitude... Which is all the more reason I must now say what I have to say.”

“...Huh?”

“The Mage Battalion cannot assist you in the rescue of Loux Krystas.”

“Huuuh?!” the three mages cried in unison.

Ulula, on the other hand, stretched her wings and resettled herself languidly, as if to say, *Well, of course not*. “Father and Kukuru control the emotions of others. He plants such beautiful love in the hearts of those he manipulates that they will turn on their comrades at the drop of a hat. Should the Mage Battalion send troops to save Loux Krystas, they would simply begin to kill one another.”

“B-But...! Kukuru’s a demon, isn’t she? So if we just make the right talisman—”

“To make such a talisman, you must know the demon’s name,” Ulula broke in. “And Father has never told me Kukuru’s true name. Listen, I’m sure you mages with your incantations and your glowing hands, announcing your names left and right, couldn’t possibly understand, but names are *everything* to witches and demons. To have your name known is to have everything taken from you—you would do well to remember that, if you wish to avoid embarrassment in the future.”

“If all we need is the demon’s name, we can jus’ go and look it up, can’t we? We know the thing manipulates love, right? Should be a cinch to find it in the

Forbidden Library!”

“So help me, you really are a fool! Just how many demons that deal in love do you think there are in this world? Similar demons with similar powers are a dime a dozen. Since my father did summon her, there *is* a possibility her name is in the demon compendium, but—”

“Even then, a hundred different demons who manipulate love are listed there,” Saybil finished, his tone grave.

Amnir nodded, her presence as commanding as ever. “If Loux Krystas’s life were truly in danger, we would risk our own to save her. But Fianos clearly has no intention of harming her. And her lifespan is long—they might spend ten, twenty, even a hundred years together, yet to her the time would be but a fleeting moment.”

“So... If you go to save her...the cost would be too high...?”

“Yes. The risks are too great for what we would gain.”

“I understand. That’s extremely logical. It makes me wonder why I ever assumed you would help us in the first place.” Saybil’s expression grew strained. “But then, why did you bring so many of your elites with you? Did you really need such an army just to escort us back to the Library?”

Amnir gave him a wry smile. “If you are asking that question—I suspect you already know the answer.”

“I know. I just can’t accept it.”

“Huh? Huh? Wh-What’s going on?” Hort tugged on Saybil’s sleeve in confusion.

He silently felt around in his bag with one hand to confirm the potions he still had on hand.

Ten—four of Flagis, six of Chordia.

Hort noticed this...and realized what was going on.

Saybil was ready to fight.

But this is the Mage Battalion! They're our allies—

“You want to stop us from rescuing Professor Los.”

“Yes.”

“Because we're valuable?”

“Losing the three of you would set the history of magedom back by a century or more. Saybil—your death could change the shape of our very future. We cannot allow that to happen.”

“But that suits your purposes, not ours.”

Saybil made his choice: a bottle of Flagis. He held it tight against his chest.

“I'm not asking all of you in the Mage Battalion to die for our selfish cause. But *I'm* going to save Professor Los. If you intend to stop me because you want to save my life, I'll immolate myself right here and now.”

For the first time, Amnir's expression seemed somewhat troubled. She did not flinch at Saybil's threat, however—her leg flashed through the air, kicking Saybil's wrist up and breaking the bone with a dull crack. The bottle of Flagis fell to the ground, and Amnir stamped on it. The liquid oozed out, igniting the dust then quickly fizzling.

Nobody moved a muscle. Hort, Kudo, and even Ulula held their breath, kept firmly in place by the taut threads of tension that enveloped the scene.

Amnir stroked Saybil's cheek, grabbed the back of his neck, and pulled him in close. “You have learned something, I believe. Even self-destruction requires

strength. In the face of overwhelming force, even your own life is not yours to govern. You also have the ability to deteriorate anything you touch with an overload of mana, I believe. We are prepared against that as well. You cannot win. Accompany us quietly back to the Forbidden Library, and carry out the mission you were given by Headmaster Albus. You see now that this is the best course of action, don't you?"

"Take me back there by force if you like, but I won't help you until Professor Los has been rescued. I won't do any more research into the Remnants of Disaster, either."

"Do you wish for your memories to be sealed away once more?"

"I would recall them someday. And when I did, I would never forgive you for your actions."

Amnir smiled. "How about this then?"

A metallic scrape; torchlight reflected in the dark of night.

Saybil gave a start as Amnir pressed the handle of the knife into his palm and set the blade against her own throat.

3

"C-Commander Amnir...?!"

"Kill me and go. Take my life as a symbol of all those you *could* have saved."

A tiny rivulet of blood trickled from Amnir's throat. Saybil tried to pull the blade away, but the incredible power of her grip held it fast.

"I can't. I don't understand...!"

“You don’t? Or are you merely feigning ignorance? Imagine a doctor faced with patients who are hurt, writhing in pain, crying out to him for help. ‘But my wife is lonely,’ he says, and hurries back to her side. A hundred people die as a result. That is no crime. But here I am, a patient clinging to the doctor’s legs, begging him not to abandon us. Go ahead, push me away. Do it, if you are so determined.”

“That’s crazy! I’m not a doctor! I didn’t ask to be born with unlimited mana—!”

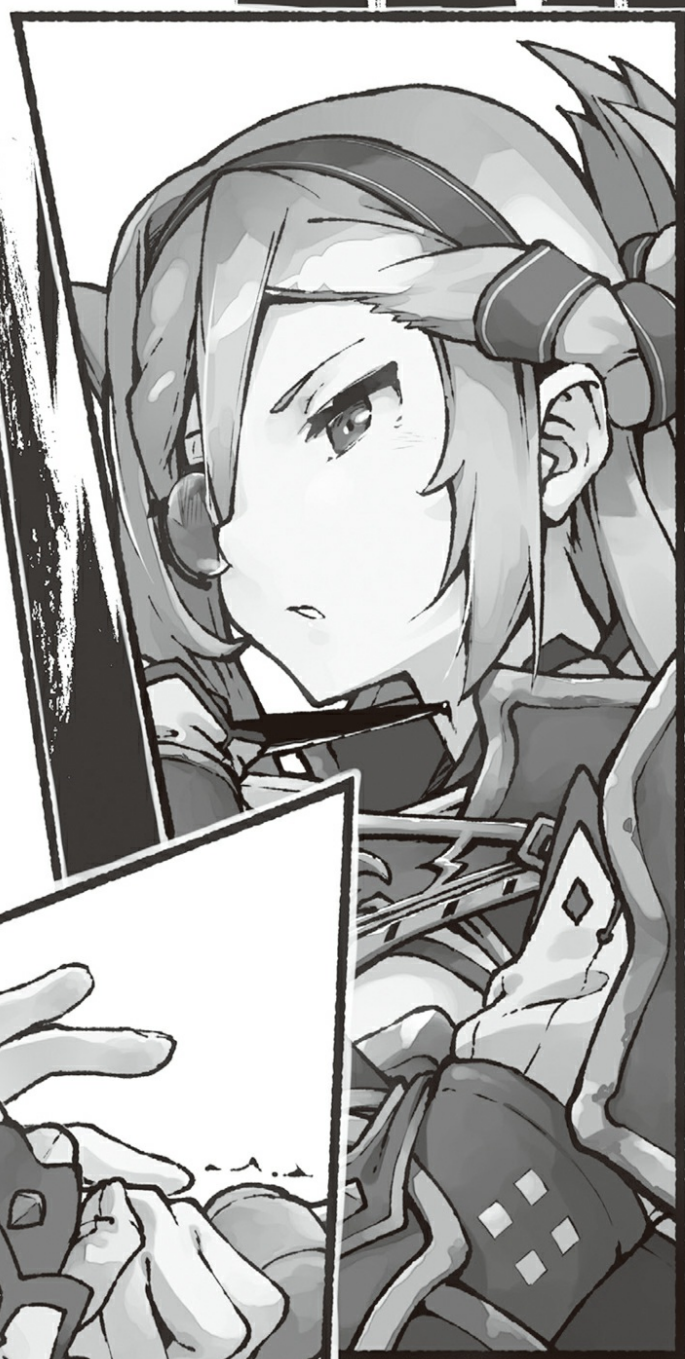
“And yet you were. There are lives that can be spared death by your presence alone... Whole countries that could be saved. I’m sure that is a burden. A terribly, suffocatingly heavy one. But that is the nature of power. I was not born to royalty of my own volition, but that does not mean I will abandon my duty to protect my people. That is the responsibility of all who are born into authority, whether they asked for it or not.”

A responsibility to serve the world.

To contribute to the cause of peace.

The abnegation of one’s own individual happiness.

Saybil could wail that he never wanted such power, but it was pointless. He could shout that he would give it all away, but what would that accomplish? He was the one with the power—the only one.



Logical, and illogical.

Saybil squeezed the knife in his hand, pouring mana into the haft. It weathered and crumbled to the ground.

“...That *is* a surprise. That knife was fashioned to withstand my mana, but you made short work of it.”

“I’m not going to kill you... But I *am* going to save Professor Los.”

“Do you understand what you’re saying?”

“I’ll beat Fianos.”

A sudden commotion erupted among the crowd of soldiers. Saybil heard a horse bray, and voices shouting.

Alive to the possibility that they were under attack from Remnants of Disaster, Amnir and Saybil tore their gazes away from one another.

“Sayb, get on!”

Saybil turned to see a horse cart clattering headlong toward him, with Kudo, Hort, and Ulula jouncing up and down in the bed. And pulling the cart—was Raul.

“Raul?! What are you—?!” Amnir’s surprised cry verged on the hysterical.

“I’m sorry, Your Highness! They’ve taken me hostage!” Raul called nonchalantly, never slackening his pace. Hort and Kudo leaned out as far as they could, stretching their arms toward Saybil, who grabbed hold and leapt up onto the bed of the speeding cart.

“Stop right there! That’s an order, Raul—Raul!”

Amnir’s furious voice faded into the distance along with the torches of the Mage Battalion. Clinging tight to the wildly swaying cart, Saybil had to scream to

be heard over the wind and the roar of the wheels on the rough ground below.

“Wh-What’s going on?!”

“You said you wanted to save Professor Los, didn’t you?!”

“Member what she said that time? That we hadda lose the stupid illusion that the whole world’ll be in trouble if we ain’t around?!”

“But dragging Raul into this...!” Saybil shouted back.

“I have a habit of doing as Her Highness wishes!”

“Then you shouldn’t be helping us!”

“It’s all right!” Raul called back, galloping lightly across the hard earth. “More than anything, Her Highness wishes for every situation to be resolved in the best way possible! You already offered the best solution to our problems, Sayb, so I’m on board!”

Defeat Fianos, save Los, get back safely.

“And if we can’t pull this off?!”

“It’s too late for ifs,” came Raul’s reply. “Now you *have* to!”

+++

Amnir stood there stunned as she watched the cart rattle away, an expression utterly devoid of its usual dignity and majesty upon her face. Behind her, several of the mage troopers cleared their throats.

“Commander Amnir... How do we proceed?”

“We don’t.”

There's nothing we can do—not now that they've fled with Raul as their hostage.

Amnir always sought the optimal course of action. Even if Raul had been taken—though it did appear to some degree as if Raul had been the one doing the taking—she couldn't put the rest of her troops in danger solely on his account.

Never pursue your quarry too far.

It was clear what had to be done.

“Our first priority is to take swift custody of these survivors. We will evacuate them to the Forbidden Library as planned, and take whatever measures might be necessary to address the question of their memories.”

“We're already fully prepared to depart, Highness...”

“Hm? Ahh... I see... Well, then...”

Amnir slowly climbed into her carriage, and her aide-de-camp waited until she was seated to give the order.

“Withdraw!”

4

The Forbidden Library was brimming with excitement.

The power of the Thousand-Eyed Sentinel of Ten Thousand Leagues—that is, the chief librarian—not only allowed him to see any place he wished, but to share those visions with others...and virtually everyone gathered at the library had derived the utmost pleasure from the activities of Saybil and his

companions.

“Oh boy, they got away,” laughed Barthel, his shoulders heaving with mirth.

The chief librarian, meanwhile, busied himself with prognostications. “How do they intend to find Loux Krystas without the aid of my power? Ah, with the Staff of Ludens, they might...”

Some even began to wager whether Fianos or Saybil would win the coming fight.

Before long, the Mage Battalion returned to the Library with the forty-seven survivors in tow, greeted by cheers from all and sundry.

“Now that’s what I call entertainment!”

“I was on the edge of my seat!”

“Hey, I’m really starting to like the Mage Battalion!”

Amidst a flurry of pats on the back, Amnir somehow managed to finish giving out orders for the day, then stumbled back to her bedroom, nursing a dull pain from the wound at her neck. She collapsed into bed and rolled over onto her back, lazily pulling off her clothes.

“...Hah.”

Then finally, it came.

“Ahaha! Ahahahahahaha!”

She rolled around kicking her legs in a fit of laughter.

It felt so—*freeing*. If she’d had her druthers, Amnir would have liked to jump on that fleeing cart right along with them... But she knew that was not her role—was painfully aware of it. She knew the weight on her shoulders, and kept count of the lives she could not afford to lose.

Ahh—but even so...

“If only there were some way I could aid them...”

There came a sudden knock at the door. Pulling on a simple dressing gown, Amnir walked over to answer it, only to find a huge crowd of Mage Battalion troops lined up outside with strangely humble expressions on their faces.

“Is something wrong?”

“...My younger brother has returned.” It was the mess sergeant who stepped forward to answer Commander Amnir’s question.

Younger brother—Amnir mouthed the words. That’s right. This man’s brother was taken by the head-harvesting ball spider.

“It is happy news. We cannot afford to let our guard down yet, of course, but—”

“They’re the ones who saved him!”

The mess sergeant interrupted her so fervently that Amnir was a little taken aback. The troopers had watched as Saybil, Hort, and Kudo fixed their resolve to rescue the spider’s victims—and had broken down in tears when the young mages succeeded, thanking them over and over though they weren’t there to hear it. They had been determined to welcome the children upon their return to the Forbidden Library, and to sincerely apologize for their past transgressions.

“Your decisions are always correct, Commander Amnir. This time’s no different, we understand that. There’d be no point in trying to save Loux Krystas, and we might even die in the attempt. But even so...!”

“...Even so?”

“Let those of us volunteer who want to. If those three’re going, we wanna go, too.”

Amnir sighed. “To die a pointless death out there?”

The despair and disappointment in their eyes pierced her. All of them were capable soldiers—not perfect, but good at heart, and willing to correct their mistakes. She could not let some fleeting emotion spur them to die in vain.

Amnir turned away. “Go, rest. I will not withdraw an order once given without some justification. We have no means of fighting Kukuru at present. Rather than rescuing Loux Krystas, a poorly-planned advance could very well lead us to kill Saybil and the others with our own hands.”

“Then what about a *well*-planned one?”

Amnir glanced over her shoulder at the fine troops under her command. “I will consider it—as long as it is the optimal course of action, naturally.”

She closed the door behind her.

The moment the latch clicked, she heard a rush of footsteps stampeding away down the corridor—*To the reading room, I expect.*



Chapter Six



Four hundred years had passed since the demon had come to be known as the Staff of Ludens. Day after day trapped inside the staff, unable to move... At first, such confinement was enough to drive a demon to the brink of madness, but to be honest, the three hundred years since it had signed the contract with Loux Krystas had not been so bad.

All those years ago, Loux Krystas was a weak, sickly girl, and the demon had known at a glance that she would not live long unless they formed their compact. She'd had no talent to speak of as a witch, and was as harmless as harmless could be.

The Staff of Ludens had needed no more reason than that to accept her as its other half. After a hundred years entombed underground, it was bored to tears. If the staff were broken, the demon would be free. It knew that, yet it felt pain whenever the staff was damaged. And this had been the beloved staff of an ancient witch; it was both physically and magically sturdy to the point of being nearly indestructible. So the demon had found itself in an unbreakable cage, then proceeded to further lock itself inside and lose the only key. To the Staff of Ludens, Loux Krystas was the one ray of light shining in through the keyhole—a small, lovely shaft of light that had unexpectedly gained its trust.

They had traveled the world together.

They had become bored of the world together.

They had sought entertainment together.

And now, the staff sought her—that they might find an end together.

“I didn’t think you could leave Professor Los’s side, Ludens!” Hort said.

The horse cart rattled on across the North. The Staff of Ludens still sat in the form of Loux Krystas, cradling itself so the others wouldn’t carelessly lay a hand on it.

“What do you mean, couldn’t leave her side?” asked Saybil.

“Like... Even if Professor Los threw the staff in the ocean, the next morning she’d wake up and Ludens would be right there next to her... Or something?”

“MY WITCH CANNOT DISCARD THE STAFF OF HER OWN VOLITION.”

“Huh?! Really?!”

“WE ARE TWO HALVES OF A WHOLE, DRAWN TO ONE ANOTHER.”

Raul continued pulling their cart onwards in the direction the Staff of Ludens indicated.

“Then we’ve really gotta do our best to save Professor Los!”

“Ta be honest, I think maybe Commander Amnir was right,” Kudo put in. “We got no shot at comin’ out on top, do we? If they kidnapped Professor Los, that means even *she* couldn’t beat ‘em.”

“Then why’d you come along?” asked Hort.

“It woulda looked totally lame if I didn’t!”

“That’s what I like about you, Kudo,” Saybil remarked.

“You makin’ fun a me? Huh?”

“And that’s what I *don’t* like about you.”

“There shouldn’t be too much cause for concern,” said Ulula, pretending not to notice their exchange. “Neither Kukuru nor Father is particularly skilled in

combat. The Mage Battalion were more worried about killing one another, if you'll recall? The seeds of love for Father may have been planted in Loux Krystas's mind, but that doesn't mean her feelings for you three have vanished. At worst, you'll merely become Father's children and be forced to join in Kukuru's game of family."

"But, like, Kukuru's the one who killed you."

"She had no other choice. Kukuru's power has never worked on me."

"Huh? How come?!"

"Who knows. Because I am a genius, I suppose?"

"Still don't do shit for us."

"Wait a minute. Is that true, even now that you're in that body?"

Ulula swiveled her owl's head around quizzically at Saybil's question.

"Meaning... If you were to enter my body, for example, would you be able to provide mana to Hort and Kudo without Kukuru's power affecting you?"

"...Aha." Ulula's head turned to look straight ahead once more. "...Perhaps?"

Saybil, Hort, and Kudo all exchanged glances.

"Um, it just kind of occurred to me... If you entered Sayb's body..."

"Go on?"

"You'd be able to perform basically unlimited sorcery, right...?"

"...Aha." Ulula's head swung around backwards to look at them once more.

"Perhaps?"

“This will be our home for tonight!”

With the mother she had always dreamed of now in her grasp, Kukuru was in high spirits. The three of them—she, Loux Krystas, and Fianos—were walking south along the road to begin their new life together. And as long as Kukuru was around, the Remnants of Disaster would not attack. Her power may not have been all that strong, but she could manipulate the goodwill or enmity of all Remnants of Disaster within its wide range.

Their lodging for the night was the same as it had been every night thus far: a home amid one of the ruined towns they found along the road, chosen on a whim. And always by Kukuru, of course. This one had been a mansion, with a spacious front garden that must have been a riot of colorful flowers before the North was overrun by demons.

Kukuru rushed into the foyer ahead of the others and surveyed her surroundings. Los harrumphed indifferently. “Dusty, but not bad. Fianos, draw me a bath.”

Fianos hastened to obey this imperious command, moving through the mansion in search of the bathroom and lighting the lamps as he went.

The most important resource for any traveler was water, especially in the North where the majority was so polluted that it was potentially deadly to touch, let alone to drink. For this reason, all witches and sorcerers who ventured that way made sure to carry some kind of magical item for producing water. Fianos opted for a “witch’s bottle,” an object that “appeared to be two, but in truth was one,” meaning that so long as one of the bottles lay submerged in a river, its twin (which he kept in his possession) would never run dry. Fianos tilted the bottle and a stream of clean river water flowed from its mouth, filling

the bathtub.

Locating sources of heat was another constant problem for traveling witches. Finding fuel in the North was challenging, and any rain could prevent it from catching. Fianos therefore kept “lava crystals” on hand, popular magical items the size of small rocks that were more than hot enough to boil water—and so the bath was ready in a matter of moments. The crystals were completely safe as long as they were kept inside a fire-eating lizard’s stomach, so those were among the first things any witch procured when setting out on a journey.

All of this Fianos had learned from Los.

He checked the temperature of the bath with his finger and smiled—but then his brow furrowed at a sudden bitter taste on the back of his tongue. He had dreamt of this for years, played it over and over again in his mind. But of all the myriad ways he had imagined their reunion, never once had he pictured anything quite so tragic.

I do...not have her love.

“Hey, Papa!”

Kukuru peeked in at him. When Fianos turned to look, he saw a quizzical look on her face.

“Papa, aren’t you and Mama going to take your bath together?”

“...What?”

“When a husband and wife love each other, they’re supposed to bathe together and sleep in the same bed. But you and Mama don’t do either.”

“Ah...”

Fianos smiled. Kukuru always wanted love to be simple. She thought the love

depicted in stories was the way things really were.

“If we want to bathe together, we will. And we’ll sleep together, too, if we choose to. But not today. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe in ten years.”

“Even though you’re husband and wife? Even though you love each other?”

“Yes.”

“Hmph.” Kukuru pouted in disappointment.

“You can take a bath with her, Kukuru. Go and fetch her, I’m sure she won’t mind.”

“No. She’s getting in with you, Papa.”

With that, Kukuru ran from the room. Los came in immediately after.

“Mama,” Fianos said. “I was just about to come and get you—”

Los silently stripped off her clothes and sank into the bath Fianos had drawn for her.

He gave a wry grin. *She hasn’t changed a bit.*

Loux Krystas had never been the least bit bashful about her naked body. She had no interest in others, nor any regard for the gaze of the opposite sex.

“Fianos. My hair.”

He obediently circled around behind her, and, after wetting her hair, began to wash it with scented oils. Los had been like this ever since they left the Forbidden Library. She had Fianos help her change, put up her hair, and wash it when she took a bath. He didn’t mind. Usually her care would have been handled by the Staff of Ludens, so Fianos felt it was a mark of her trust in him that he was tasked with it now.

As he washed her hair, Los slowly sunk deeper into the bath, and her eyes closed in contentment. A feeling of joy slowly filled him at the sight.

But is this...romantic love?

Searching his heart, Fianos couldn't suppress a little laugh.

"Wherefore dost thou chuckle so?"

"I was feeling a little nostalgic, that's all."

"Nostalgic?"

"Back when I was a child, I wanted to wash your hair... Remember?"

"Ah yes, so thou didst."

"But I was small, and I couldn't do it properly... I just ended up soaking wet and covered in bubbles... And in the end the Staff of Ludens couldn't bear it any longer and helped out with it all."

"...Ah yes, so it did."

In Fianos's memories of his time with Los, the Staff of Ludens was *always* there. The thing was a mere staff, but it had a will of its own—a demon, yet possessed of emotion. The staff had been as important a family member to him as Los herself.

But now the Staff of Ludens was gone.

"I'm sorry, Mama. I'm sorry Kuku threw Ludens away."

"Enough, 'tis no matter. Naught else could she have done. The staff was a grave threat to Kuku, unaffected as my little Ludens is by the power of demons. Rejoice in my pardon... Though I have no love for repression born of caution."

“Mama.”

“Fianos, wouldst desist in calling me ‘Mama’? We are to be man and wife, are we not?”

“Ah, right... But then...what should I call you?”

“Los will suffice. ’Tis how all my nearest and dearest address me.”

Los. Fianos rolled the name around in his mouth. It didn’t feel right, somehow.

“Whence that look upon thy face? Am I not thy sweet and lovely bride, whom thou didst go so far as to appropriate the powers of a demon to possess?”

“...Yes.”

“I am conscious that the love impressed upon me is false, yet still do I love thee. And the more I love someone, the more strict and cruel I am with them, the more untrammelled in my behavior. ’Twill truly be a sight to behold, the day thou dost grow tired of my affections, and turnest to beg that blasted demon to end our love.”

Los turned in the water and propped an elbow on the edge of the bathtub, resting her chin in her hand and narrowing her eyes at him like a kitten playing with a mouse.

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“Papa, when are you and Mama going to have a baby? When is Kuku’s new little sister going to be here? I want her soon. A little brother would be fine, too, but I’d *really* like a sister.”

It was night, and Los, Fianos, and Kukuru lay side by side in the wide bed of the mansion's master bedroom. Kukuru was in the middle, with Fianos and Los on either side.

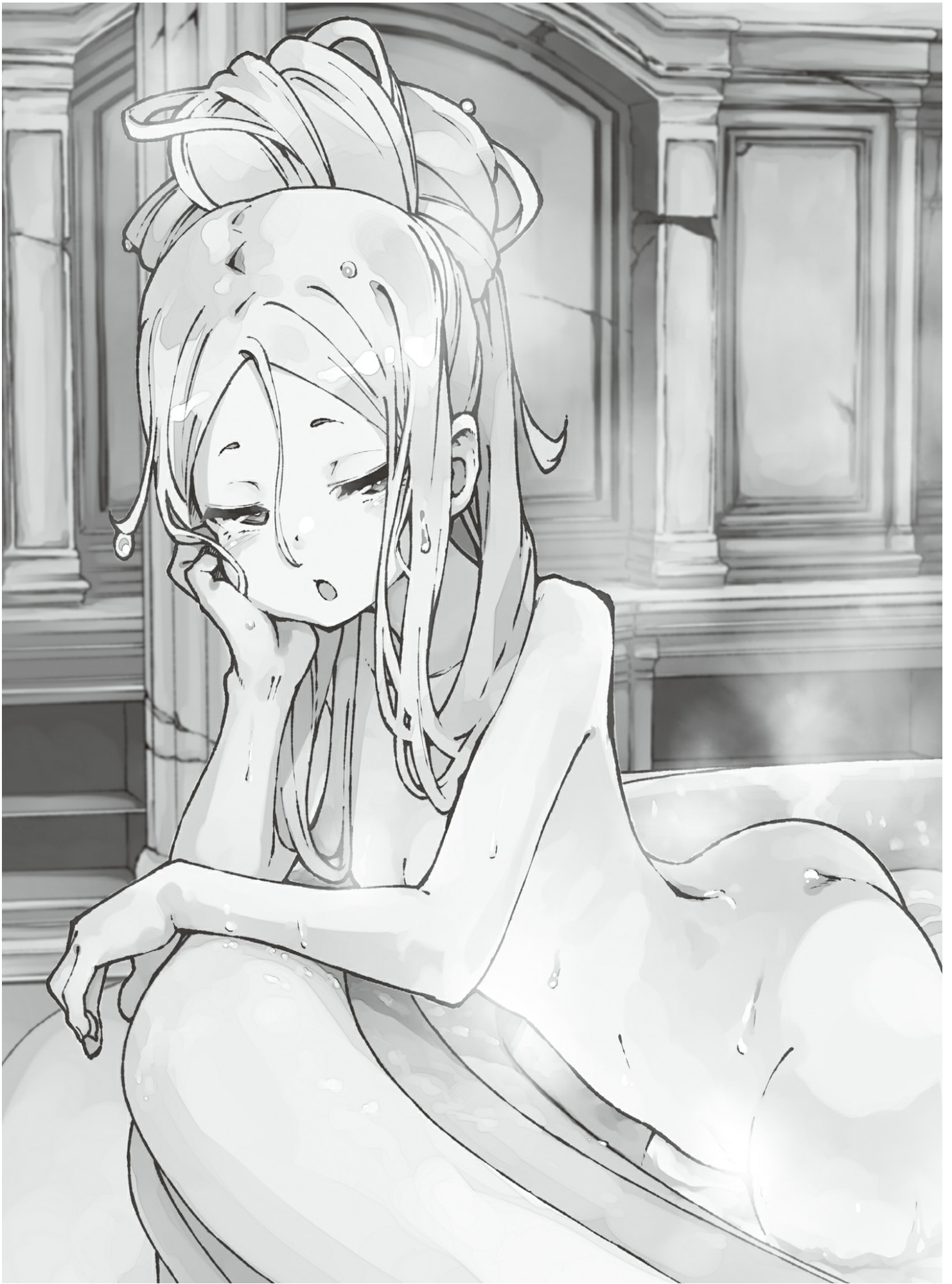
"What is this preposterous prattle? We could never have a child." Los was already half-asleep, yawning as she spoke.

"...What?" Kukuru was stunned, and turned to look at the ancient witch.

"I am contracted to the Staff of Ludens... Unlike Fianos, who lives on by his own power. My body will never age, but nor will it ever grow. Never shall I starve, and nor am I capable of bearing children."

"Oh... I see."

Los's glance flitted over to Kukuru, who was clearly disappointed by her answer.



“If thou wouldst have done with me, now is the time. Please, free me from this curse of love. It enrages me that I am unable to bear my beloved’s children,” Los mumbled sleepily.

Fianos hugged her from behind, sweeping Kukurū, who lay between them, up in his arms as he went.

“How now? I cannot sleep like this.”

“Just so long as you’re here, Mama,” said Fianos. “That’s enough for me.”

“So thou sayest, but what of Kukurū?”

“Kukurū only needs Mama and Papa. I’m sorry for being so selfish,” the demon replied, clinging to Los’s back.

Los closed her eyes with an indifferent snort. “Then all’s well, I suppose.”

Her breath fell into the quiet, regular rhythm of sleep.

“...I’m sorry, Mama,” Fianos whispered. He had seen countless forms of love in his life. He knew love that didn’t fit, love that led to conflict, love that would break itself apart precisely *because* the people involved loved one another.

And somewhere inside, he knew. That Los’s love, and his own, would not fit.

Fianos shed silent tears as he crept quietly from the bedroom. The woman he loved, whom he had sought for two hundred years, was now by his side—but it was so bitterly painful that he could hardly breathe. The closer she was and the more tightly bound they were, the further away the happiness he had imagined seemed to drift.

He felt sick.

If this is how it’s going be, I should just—

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of an explosion.

The house shook, windows shattering. Fianos dashed to a broken pane and looked out. The mansion's main entrance had been blown to pieces, four familiar figures rising out of the swirling dust and smoke. They noticed Fianos's presence, and one among them—a dark-eyed young boy with black hair—grinned brazenly and waved to him.

“Good evening, Father.”

“Kukuru!” Fianos screamed. “Call the gatekeepers!”

2

“Father! Where on earth are you going?! And calling the gatekeepers, no less?! You cannot possibly have failed to recognize your precious Ulula, can you, Father?!” An enraged Ulula swung her fists wildly at Fianos's reaction to her polite greeting.

“I mean, you're in Saybil's body right now—how the hell's he s'posed ta know it's you?”

“Also, like... Do you think Sayb's okay?”

With Ulula inhabiting Saybil's body, she had transferred his soul to the owl in her place. At present he was off somewhere with the Staff of Ludens, presumably searching for Professor Los.

“Saybil, can you hear me?” Ulula asked the absent mage/owl.

A startled squawk echoed through her head by way of reply.

“What? Whatever is the matter?”

“No, sorry, it’s nothing. Still just takes me by surprise, hearing your voice in my head like this... Anyway, what’s up?”

“Father has ordered Kukurū to summon the gatekeepers.”

“Good. Everything’s going according to plan.”

“My plan was to be recognized by Father inside your body, have a moving reunion, and live happily ever after...! Father can be a touch—well, slow when it comes to these things. It’s most adorable!”

Hort shrieked. “Ulula, please don’t make Sayb’s body say weird things like that...!”

“Oh? I have grown quite fond of this form, and in fact, I’m starting to feel it would be something of a waste to return it to him...”

“No way, you *have* to give it back!!”

“If you would like, Hort, I could kiss you with this body.”

“I like what’s *inside* of Sayb! Why would I wanna be kissed by someone who’s Sayb on the outside but Ulula on the inside?! That’d just make me mad!”

“Man, no way are we ever gonna see Saybil this expressive again, huh...”

The three of them strolled straight through the mansion’s ruined front entrance, bantering all the while.

Raul waited outside on standby. They needed him prepared in case a quick getaway should be in order, and anyway, his massive horse’s frame wasn’t particularly suited to indoor combat.

“So what are these ‘gatekeepers,’ anyway?” asked Kudo, looking around the large, empty hall. Suddenly they heard footsteps thundering toward the mansion at incredible speed, and all three whirled around, their vigilance

directed back the way they had come. When they saw what burst through the rubble, however, their jaws dropped.

“H...Head-harvesting ball spiders...?! *Three* of them?!”

“Wh-Wh-Wh... Wait, wait, wait! We had all that trouble with jus’ one of ’em, the hell we gonna do now?!”

Hort and Kudo panicked, scrambling to prepare themselves for the monsters’ onslaught.

Beside them, Ulula ground her teeth. “That nasty little...! Kukururu chose those creatures as gatekeepers because she knows how difficult it’d be for any human to get past them...!”

Faced with three of the spiders at once, attempting to free the captive people from one would likely just create an opening for the other two.

We must take them out one by one, she thought. *But for that, we’ll have to draw them away from each other, divide and conquer. Though it would be so much easier to simply destroy them with a single attack—*

“Into the corridor!” Hort called out. “They won’t be able to get through the doorway, it’s too narrow!”

“And then *we’ll* be trapped!” Kudo argued.

“Better than being attacked from three sides at once, isn’t it?!”

Kudo and Hort slowly backed away, watching the spiders intently. With Saybil in her owl’s body, Ulula could hardly risk a rash confrontation, and agreed that they should retreat for the time being.

“Saybil! What’s your situation?! Have you located Loux Krystas?!”

“...Wait, I’ve found her! Room at the far end of the second floor!”

“We are no match for these spiders, so once you have her, we retreat at once! Though to be frank, I wonder about the safety of our little horsey waiting outside.”

Hort, Kudo, and Ulula pelted into the hallway with the spiders hot on their heels, the beasts’ horrifying forelegs and jaws swiping at the trio’s backs as they tried to force their way through the narrow opening.

Fianos had two options in the face of their attack: to give fight, or to withdraw. In truth, Ulula did not know which he would choose. Her father had no love of battle, so there was the distinct possibility he would flee while they were occupied with the gatekeepers. But Fianos also knew that, unless they were killed, Saybil and the others would pursue him to the ends of the earth to get Professor Los back.

In which case... “Yes. You *will* fight, won’t you.”

Ulula stopped in her tracks. Fianos stood waiting for them in the middle of the hallway with feet planted, his slender staff gripped in both hands and held out before him, parallel to the ground. At a single light caress, it transformed into a razor-sharp blade.

“Ah!” Ulula cried out. “Get down!”

She threw herself to the floor and Hort and Kudo followed suit, the slash of wind passing just inches above their heads. When they looked up, Fianos was gone. Ulula could almost feel the cold blade at the back of her neck, and she kicked hard against the floor, launching herself high into the air. Twisting around mid-leap, she saw Fianos already preparing his next attack.

Too late—the blade will take me in the heart.

“Father, wait—!”

Fianos charged, but the moment before his blade found its mark, he suddenly kicked off against the floor awkwardly—an arrow of light had pierced the ground at his feet. When Ulula looked up, she saw Hort and Kudo drawing bows of empty air, arrows of light aimed directly at Fianos. Before she could scream for them to stop, they released the magical projectiles—but Fianos cut the arrows down almost lazily, circling around behind Ulula as he fell back. She felt his blade creep up to her neck, and froze.

“Wait, Father! Don’t you recognize me? It’s Ulula!”

“Quiet. I know. And those two won’t attack this body. Right?”

“R-Right...”

“Good girl. I’m going to use it as a shield to cover our retreat. I’m sorry, Ulula. I’m sorry for leaving you alone like that. I’m so happy you’re alive. Can you endure being in that body a little longer while we find you a new one?”

“But... Kukuru, she...”

“I scolded her,” Fianos broke in. “She’s very sorry for what she did. I know she’ll be thrilled to have you back.”

“...Are you...sure?”

Hm? Something nagged at Ulula. What am I doing all this for? Why did I come here with these people in the first place? Because Kukuru wants to kill me. I have to defeat her, or I can never again be by Father’s side. With Kukuru beaten, Loux Krystas can go back to Saybil and the others, and I can have Father all to myself. But Kukuru isn’t trying to kill me any longer, and Father is happy I’m here. So if I can just accept Loux Krystas, then the three of us—no, the four of us, now—can have a happy life together.

Kudo and Hort stood motionless, arrows of light at the ready. If they let loose

now, they would hit Ulula—that is, they would hit Saybil’s body.

“Father, Hort and Kudo...”

“It’s no good, Ulula. I’ve been trying for a while now, but my power doesn’t work on them. Sorry to say, they can’t be part of our family.”

Kukuru was a demon capable of creating affection where none previously existed. She could turn indifference to adoration, or stoke an ember of goodwill into a burning, passionate love. But one thing she could not do was induce a person to harm someone they loved with all their heart. No matter how much false adoration she stirred up, Kukuru could never take away true love. Ulula knew that Hort loved Saybil—so she could never be made to join Fianos.

What about Kudo, then? she wondered. *Who does he love, that he’s standing there with bow in hand?*

Ulula dropped her eyes.

It matters not.

What mattered to Ulula above all else was her love for Fianos.

—I thought you looked like Mama for a moment there.

She found those words drifting back into her mind.

—Does that...make you sad, Father...?

—A little, yes.

Ulula bit her lip. A deafening barrage of signals had been flooding into her mind from Saybil for a while now.

“Father. I—”

“What is it?”

“Was I a...replacement...for Loux Krystas?”

“What in the world are you—?”

Shing—the sound of a blade slicing through the air rattled her eardrums.

“Ulula, get down!”

Fianos shoved her out of the way. She fell, looking back to see a huge jet-black battle axe swinging down at her father seemingly out of nowhere. He managed to block it at the last second, a single strand of hair from his bangs floating to the floor.

“Oho? Thou hast stayed the blow? Such reflexes! Very well, rejoice in my pardon! I have a great love of long days spent in training, and of hard-won skill. Come then, Fianos. I shall give thee thy punishment.”

It was Loux Krystas. In her hand she held the Staff of Ludens, and upon her shoulder sat Ulula’s owl familiar, currently inhabited by Saybil.

Fianos’s lip quivered. “How...? But... My sorcery...!”

“Thou speakest of ‘thy’ sorcery? Never did it affect me, nor ever would it! ’Twas all an act, a bit of fun to keep me entertained while I was parted from my little Ludens.”

“That can’t be! Only true love can break Kukuru’s spell! You don’t love anyone, Mama! My powers couldn’t possibly fail against you!”

“What poppycock is this?! I am positively overflowing with love—and yet!”

She brandished the battle axe above her head and swung it ruthlessly down at Fianos once more. He deflected the blow with his thin staff and leapt back, landing on the ceiling.

“Unbelievable!” Los cried, looking up at him. “What is the meaning of this? When didst thou learn such parlor tricks?!”

“...You can do this too, can’t you, Mama?”

“Well, of course.” Los smirked, and ran up the wall, slashing at Fianos. “Thou claimest I am devoid of love? Hast gone senile these past two hundred years?! Yet I grant thee my pardon! I have no hatred for the foolish ways of my beloved son. Here, allow me to demonstrate the full extent of my love!”

Los smiled happily as she pressed the attack, not letting up for even a second. It was all Fianos could do to block, duck, and dodge her advances. He could never harm her, and Fianos knew there was only one way their contest could end.

“Ulula! Are you okay?!”

Hort and Kudo rushed over to Ulula, who was still lying on the floor in a daze, unable to tear her eyes away from the deadly duel unfolding before her. Saybil flapped over and landed clumsily on Ulula’s shoulder in a flurry of feathers.

“Sayb, where’s Kukurū?” Hort asked.

“Haven’t seen her.”

“We’ve gotta do something about those gatekeepers...! Even if Professor Los beats Fianos, we’ll never be able to take down three spiders on our own.”

“Come ta think of it, you figure those monsters’ll just take off if we kill Kukurū?”

“I dunno! Come on, Ulula, stand up! Let’s go look for Kukuru!”

“But...”

Ulula looked up at Fianos and Los crossing blades on the ceiling. Suddenly Fianos’s staff was knocked from his hands, and he leapt to the ground to retrieve it from where it had stuck into the floor. Naturally, Los wasn’t about to let that happen. She sprinted down the wall and, using the Staff of Ludens, launched herself at Fianos, her kick taking him in the side the moment before he could grab hold of his weapon. He went flying and collided with the opposite wall, then crashed to the floor with a grunt of pain.

“Father!”

It looked to her as if Los was about to finish Fianos off, and in a panic, Ulula clambered to her feet and rushed in between them. Fianos could no longer so much as stand, but Los hadn’t even broken a sweat.

“Get out of the way, Ulula.”

“Why?!”

“It’s okay. We’re just playing around... Hng...” Fianos clutched his side, gritting his teeth against the pain.

“Father...!”

“I broke three of thy ribs. It hurts, I expect. Perhaps I was a little too forceful with my roughhousing?”

Ulula bit her lip. *How can she be so callous? She must know how much Fianos loves her. How can she treat him so cruelly? I should have said it. I should have told him that Saybil was here to save Los. I should have told him that Los was coming, and that she had the Staff of Ludens. And I should have let him use Saybil’s body as a shield, so that the two of us could escape together.*

“I’m sorry, Father...!” Ulula burst into tears. “I’m sorry for being such a disappointment...!”

Fianos cocked his head, and reached up to gently ruffle her hair. “You’re talking about what I said that night, aren’t you? Sorry, I didn’t explain myself well enough. I wasn’t sad because you aren’t like Mama.”

“Huh?”

“I was sad because I realized I was starting to forget her face. I thought I remembered everything about her, but all I was really chasing was an illusion...”

Los walked quietly over to the two of them. The Staff of Ludens had transformed back to its normal shape, and the black orb embedded in its tip was quivering with joy at being returned to its master’s hand.

“Here. Thy staff,” Los said, freeing Fianos’s weapon from the floor and holding it out to him. When he took hold of the handle, it became a lustrous ebony staff once more, its service as a sword over for the time being.

“An interesting staff thou hast in thy possession.”

“I always wanted one like yours. I’ve experienced so much, Mama, and I’ve got so much I want to share with you. Things you’ve never seen, stories you’ve never heard...”

Fianos began to giggle. His smile was so radiant that it made Ulula feel a little strange inside.

Los smiled gently as well, and tapped the Staff of Ludens against her shoulder. “I look forward to it all. My apologies, young Kudo, but wilt thou heal his injuries?”

Kudo’s scales turned a dark, disgruntled color. “You guys are tryin’a wrap this shit up in a nice, neat bow, but I ain’t buyin’ it. An’ do somethin’ about those

damn gatekeepers, already!”

Kudo pointed to the spiders, who were still squirming at the doorway, trying to force their way into the corridor.

“Look at all this trouble I’ve caused you. I’ll have Kukurū call them off at once.”

“I’m afraid not.”

The sudden words filled the air with tension, dashing any hope of respite.

3

Kukurū stood at the far end of the long hallway, on the bottom step of a staircase leading to the upper floor.

“Why are you giving up? For a hundred years you refused to give Kukurū a mother because you said it *had* to be *her*. Now we’ve finally found Mama, so why are you giving her up so easily?” There was a disturbing dissonance between her tear-stained face and the terribly quiet tone of her voice.

But Ulula simply sneered. “What do you mean, giving up? What else can Father do? It was *your* power that didn’t work on Loux Krystas! In any event, don’t you think you should start by apologizing to me?!”

A sudden boom echoed down the hall. Ulula frowned and turned to see that the head-harvesting ball spiders had disappeared from the doorway, leaving in their wake a prickling nervous tension on her skin; she had goosebumps all

over.

The earth trembled.

“Kukuru... What did you do?”

“It wasn’t me, it was you.”

“Wha?!”

“I cast a spell on you, so that all kinds of Remnants of Disaster will like you. And by ‘like,’ I mean want to eat, want to *kill*.”

Ulula turned pale.

Then those petrification bugs that were chasing me... The spider that appeared at the first survey base... That was all—

“You would go so far...?! Why did you want Loux Krystas so much more than you wanted me?!”

Just then, they heard the sound of hooves on wood—coming from the floor above. Before anyone could register their surprise, Raul came rushing down the stairs with a javelin in hand. He threw it at Kukuru, but she was too quick for him and jumped aside. Raul continued straight toward his companions, plucking the javelin out of the floorboards as he passed.

“Raul?!”

“This is it! Time to retreat!” Raul called out in response to Saybil’s startled squawk. Kudo had just finished healing Fianos’s ribs, and Raul pulled him and Ulula up onto his back without even slowing down. Then, with Hort seated squarely on his shoulders, he rushed away down the hall, pursued by a horde of tiny, creeping Remnants of Disaster.

“R-Raul, wait! Professor Los is—!”

“Worry not! Hasten on! Fianos, ’tis time to run!”

“But Kukuru—”

“We must beat a temporary retreat! Leave the familial squabbles for later!”

Los and Fianos dashed after Raul.

“Wait, what about the spiders?!” Kudo cried.

“I drew them away, then gave them the slip and came around by way of the second floor,” Raul answered.

“Alone?! Damn, guess that’s why yer the Mage Battalion’s second-in-command!”

In the blink of an eye, Raul was across the mansion grounds. He threw his three riders into the cart, and a moment later, Los and Fianos leapt aboard as well. Raul looked back in momentary astonishment.

“Fast, am I not?”

“Monstrously so...” Raul admitted.

Cackling at his shocked expression, Los climbed onto his back.

“Think I could request a harness?”

“Little Ludens, drayage!”

At Los’s clipped command, a black liquid oozed from the orb embedded in the Staff of Ludens, harnessing Raul to the horse cart.

“Run as fast as thy legs can carry thee! This is the sturdiest and most pliable harness in all the world!”

Raul reared and dashed away with such momentum that it seemed impossible the Remnants of Disaster could give chase. But there were just so

many of them...

“Saybil! Return my familiar’s body to me!” demanded Ulula.

“What? Now?!” Saybil hooted back.

“Don’t give it to her, Sayb! I like you this way!” Hort glared at Ulula, hugging the owl close. “Don’t try anything stupid! That horde of monsters isn’t going to stop just because you fly in and let them kill you. Don’t go sacrificing yourself for nothing!”

“But I might be able to buy you some time! Even just a few moments!”

“Who would sacrifice a friend just to buy a few moments to escape?!”

Hort’s sharp cry sent Ulula reeling, and she collapsed back into a heap.

“Whatever moments you could’ve bought us, I’ll buy way more with my magic. With Sayb giving me mana, I can cast as many spells as it takes. And if I have to kill those people along with the head-harvesting ball spiders in order to survive, then that’s what I’ll do.”

“H-Hey Raul, eyes front! Look out! You’re gonna crash right into ‘em!” Kudo screamed, leaning out wide from the cart. There was another horde of Remnants of Disaster ahead of them, no less numerous than the one behind. The clamor of monstrous birds was enough to blot out the sun in the sky above—but still, Raul did not slow.

“Tell me thou hast a plan, Raul!”

“Not a plan, exactly... But that’s where their numbers appear *thinnest*.”

They were surrounded on all sides now, and their foes were closing in—but Raul was intent on breaking through. With the Staff of Ludens’s power, Hort’s magic, Ulula’s sorcery, and Saybil’s mana, they might just have a chance. And

even if Raul were wounded, Kudo was there to heal him.

Suddenly the earth swelled precipitously on either side, creating a lane for Raul to race down. Walls rose up and met overhead, creating a shield to protect them from the monstrous birds.

“Wh-What the...?! A road?!”

The light around them was snatched away, and Raul galloped even faster toward the single remaining point of light—the exit. When they emerged from the tunnel, the very air shook with triumphant cries. The soldiers of the Mage Battalion were assembled there—every last one of them.

“This is quite the reception! A production worthy of my return, I dare say!”

Los removed the magical harness connecting Raul to the cart, which came to a sudden, juddering halt.

“Your Highness!”

“Raul, to me!” called Amnir.

He rushed to her side and raised his visor to reveal a broad smile. “You’re just in time for the finale, Your Highness.”

“It was not ‘I’ who did this,” she shrugged. “The full force of the Forbidden Library was brought to bear in creating talismans against those demons who control love. I intended to bring only as many elite troops to this battle as the number of talismans in our possession would allow, but ultimately enough were produced for the entire battalion.”

“Incredible. So even the witches at the Library helped out?”

“I could scarce believe my eyes. We in the Mage Battalion might slave all night long to create but a single talisman, yet those witches and sorcerers

turned out countless wards in the blink of an eye.”

With that, the worry that Kukuru’s power might turn the soldiers of the Mage Battalion against each other was eliminated, and all that remained was to mop up the encroaching enemy.

“Exterminate them!”

At Amnir’s order, the mage troopers began chanting in unison. Saybil realized in that moment what he needed to do, and flapped his wings frantically in Ulula’s face.

“Ulula, give me back my body!”

“Huh?”

“Quick!”

Ulula rushed to comply, and for a moment Saybil felt dizzy as he passed from the little owl’s body back into his much larger human form. He steadied himself, however, and jumped down from the bed of the cart.

“Professor Los!”

“Hmm?”

“I want to give the Mage Battalion as much mana as they can use. Can you help me? With Ludens, I mean.”

Los blinked back at him, then grinned. “What fun. Rejoice, for I have a great love of the dawn of new ideas!”

The Staff of Ludens sucked the mana out of any who touched it—and provided that mana to its contracted witch, Loux Krystas.

Meaning that through the Staff of Ludens, I can give mana to other people, too—I think.

Los planted Ludens firmly in the ground. “’Tis time for a feast, Ludens.”

Black liquid spilled out from the staff’s orb, forming a thin film at the feet of every member of the Mage Battalion.

Gripping the Staff of Ludens in one hand, Los held out the other to Saybil. “Come, young Sayb. Ludens and I will control the flow of thy mana to these hardy warriors. Clear thy mind, and let loose the torrent!”

“Right!”

He took her hand.

But.

“Hold a moment.” Los raised an eyebrow. “*This* is far more dramatic, think you not?”

She yanked Saybil’s hand, and as he staggered forward, she pushed her tongue between his lips.

4

“How should I put this... I believe the next decade of work to cleanse the North has been accomplished in a matter of seconds,” Commander Amnir mumbled in astonishment, radiating an aura of total confidence that their mission was complete.

“Makes you wonder what we’ve been doing all this time...” muttered Raul dazedly.

With Saybil’s unlimited supply of mana, the Mage Battalion had decisively routed the Remnants of Disaster and saved hundreds from the head-harvesting

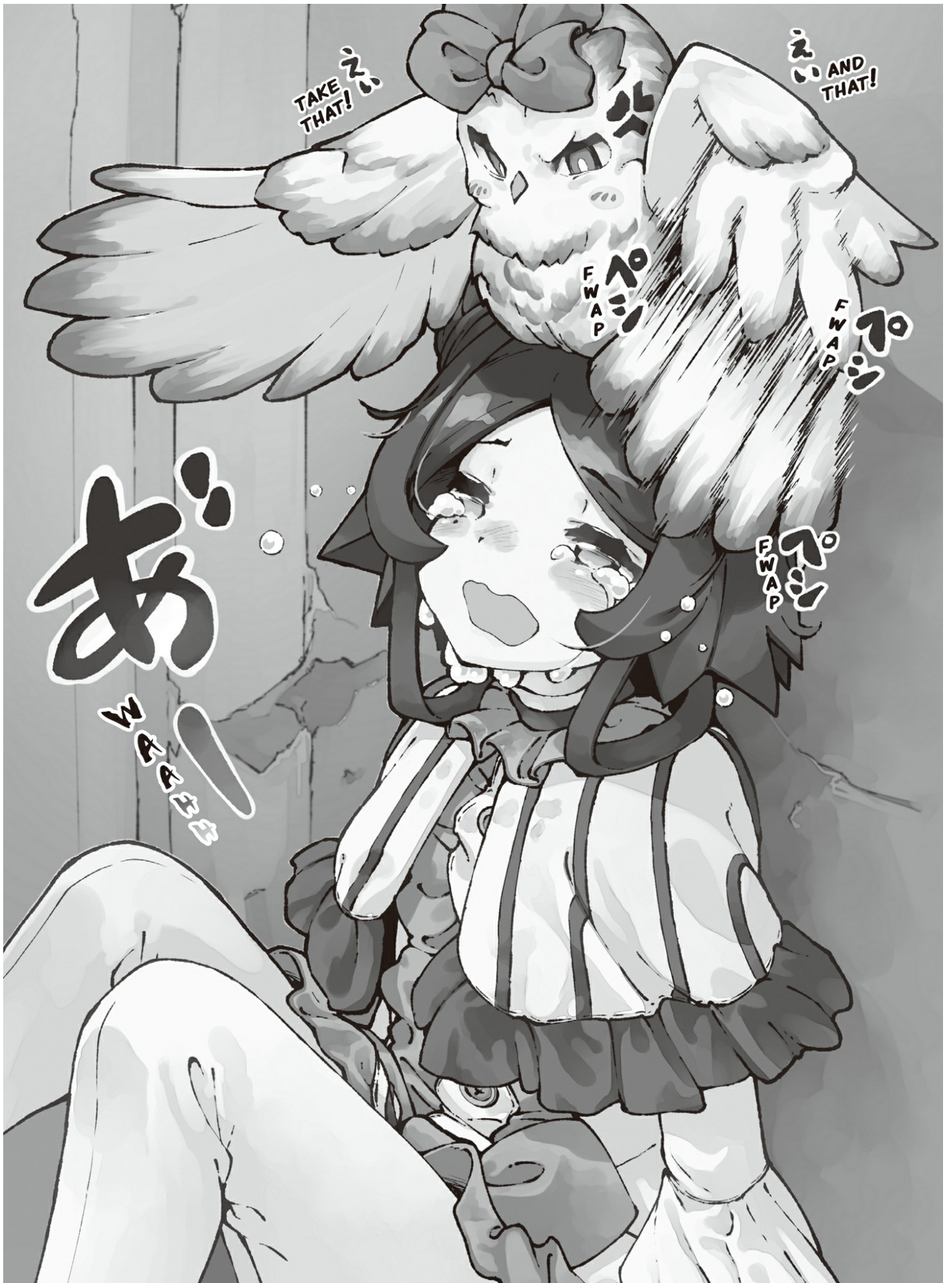
ball spiders among the horde. Their gains were so great that for a time they were simply overwhelmed by the enormity of what they had achieved.

The sky was bright—how long had it been since the Northern skies were so clear? Aside from a few specimens left deliberately intact for research purposes, not even the corpses of the Remnants of Disaster remained on the battlefield.

Through the unnaturally quiet wasteland walked Fianos, with Ulula the owl upon his shoulder. They went into the town, found the mansion, and, stepping in through the entryway Ulula had destroyed, scanned the hall. Peeking into the upstairs bedroom where Los, Fianos, and Kukuru had slept side by side, they found what they sought—Kukuru, huddled in a corner, clutching her knees to her chest and sobbing.

“That was quite the scene, Kukuru.”

“Are you going to kill me?”



“Why would I?”

“Kukuru couldn’t make Papa and Mama love each other, and Kukuru’s power couldn’t do anything to stop Mama’s little ducklings...! I’m so useless... I-I’m a failure of a demon...! So now you’re going to get rid of Kukuru and find a new demon, aren’t you...?!?”

Fianos gave a wry smile. “I chose you, Kukuru. Because your power, the gentle power of your love, was something I thought I needed. But Mama didn’t love me the way I wanted her to even *with* your power, and that’s not your fault. She just loves me as a son, that’s all. And that’s plenty.”

Fianos knelt down in front of Kukuru, and as he wiped her tears away, Ulula flapped over to perch on Kukuru’s head.

“Anyway, you still owe me an apology!!”

“I’m sorry, Ulula. Kukuru just wanted Mama so badly... I thought if she were here we could be happy... But I was so lonely without you...!”

“Of *course* you were!” Ulula hooted, pecking vigorously at Kukuru’s forehead. “You’re a centuries-old demon, but you still don’t understand *anything*, do you?! Are you *quite* sure you’re a demon of love?!”

“Listen, Kukuru. The terms of our contract were that you’d give me your power in return for a loving family...and that still holds. Even without Mama, Ulula and I are your family, and we still love you, demon or no. Or is that not enough?”

“It’s enough,” Kukuru cried out, bursting into tears once more. She grabbed Ulula from atop her head and squeezed the bird to her chest. Fianos took both of them in his arms and drew them close. They were warmer than Los had been, that night he embraced her as she lay with her back to him—and Fianos

felt a deep contentment wash over him as he held his family in his arms.



Epilogue



When Saybil and the others returned to the towering Forbidden Library, they received a heroes' welcome, quite the reverse of what they had experienced upon their first arrival. They were also informed that the chief librarian had seen—and broadcast—everything they'd done since fleeing the Library, which made the three young mages feel even more uncomfortable than the contemptuous stares which had initially greeted them. Huddling together bashfully, they were let straight through to the chief librarian's office, where they were given all manner of details they had not been privy to from their own perspective.

"Wow... So Kukurū's power doesn't work on you if you're already in love with someone..." muttered Hort.

With this most surprising of revelations in mind, Saybil set about piecing together who liked who.

"So Kukurū's power didn't work on Ulula because she loves Fianos... I like Professor Los so it didn't work on me, and Hort loves me so that's why *she* was okay..."

Saybil and Hort suddenly turned to look at Kudo, who was standing uncomfortably beside them. Hort's jaw drop was the most monumental of the century, and she began trembling all over.

"You're in love with someone, Kudo?! Who?! Hey, hey, who is it?! Tell me, tell me, tell me!!"

"Ah, dammit, there ain't *nobody*! I don't love no one, so shut your freakin'

mouth already!”

“You’re lying! Kukurū’s power didn’t work on you! You didn’t go over to Fianos’s side and start attacking us or anything! Hey, so who is it?! Commander Amnir?! Or what, have my stunning features finally won you over?!”

“It sure as hell ain’t *you*! That much, at least, I’ll swear on my honor...!”

“I see you’re all just as lively inside the Library as out...” Barthel gave the squabbling trio a wry grin from his place at the chief librarian’s side.

“Never a dull moment!” boasted Los, lounging on a sofa and enjoying some tea and cakes. “...Oh, I nearly forgot! I spoke with young Amnir earlier, and it appears she wishes to extend you a formal invitation to join the Mage Battalion.”

“Huh?! Seriously?!”

Kudo had entered the Academy of Magic with the express goal of someday joining the Church and Mage Brigade, to which the Mage Battalion belonged.

Los nodded calmly at his excited outburst. “’Tis thanks to thy successful use of the most powerful healing spell in the *Grimoire of Zero*. Shouldst thou join them, ’twill be like having the vaunted Mage Medic Corps of the Holy City of Akdios in tow.”

“Kudo, that’s amazing! I’m so happy for you!”

“Thou art quite amazing thyself, young Hort. So much so, in fact, that ’tis under consideration for thee to be granted limited permission to examine the *Grimoire of Zero*.”

“Huh?! The forbidden tome?!”

“’Twas always expected that graduates of the Royal Academy of Magic, with a

certain degree of accomplishment under their belt, would someday be permitted to view the *Grimoire*. I'm sure there were times during your escapade when knowledge of its magic would have made thy trials a smidge easier to overcome."

"Whoa—! I wanna read it! I wanna! Like, right now!"

"'Tis as yet still under consideration!"

"Fiiiiine."

Hort had leaned so far forward in her eagerness that she almost toppled over when Los shut her down.

"Now, as for thee, Sayb..."

"Oh, no thanks." The words slipped ever so easily from Saybil's lips.

"Huh?! How come?!" Hort cried in eminently reasonable astonishment.

"Man, who the hell d'you think you are?!" Kudo exploded.

"I dunno, it just seems kind of restrictive..."

"R-Restrictive...? I mean, I suppose we'll have missions and things to go on, and they'll keep us busy heading off here and there, but..."

"Exactly. So I think I want to stay here a little longer."

"Here... You mean at the Forbidden Library?"

Saybil nodded. "There are just so many books I haven't read yet. And there are witches here that create their own magic, like Ulula. I'd like to hear what they have to say, and to continue my research into magic potions. The only reason they want me in the Mage Battalion is as a source of mana, anyway—right?"

“They hope thou wilt join the Battalion as their dedicated potion maker,” replied Los.

“Meaning I’d only be able to make potions for *them*?”

“Indeed, I believe that is their expectation.”

“Then I definitely can’t join. That is... I don’t want to.”

“Oho!” Los chortled in admiration. “Thou hast learned to be so bold. Thou knowest thine own worth, and can choose thine own path, even if it be against the wind! Yes, rejoice in my pardon! For I have a great love of the trials of the road yet uncharted!”

“It’s nothing that grand... Just that the Mage Battalion doesn’t need *me*, it needs a source of mana and potions. I’m pretty sure they’ll be able to manage without me.”

“But...” Hort began. *If me and Kudo are joining the Mage Battalion... And Saybil’s staying here...* “Then...this is...goodbye...?”

“Hmm... Yeah, I guess it is.”

Hort’s eyes welled up with tears. “Huh? No way, I don’t want that...! I’m not joining the Mage Battalion either, then!”

“Come on, Hort.”

“But... You need someone to infuse your potions with magic, don’t you?! You can still barely cast your own spells...!”

“Sure. But it doesn’t have to be you, Hort.”

“I’m saying that I want it to be me!!”

Saybil gently placed his hands on Hort’s trembling shoulders. “The Battalion really *needs* you and Kudo. But it’s not where I belong.”

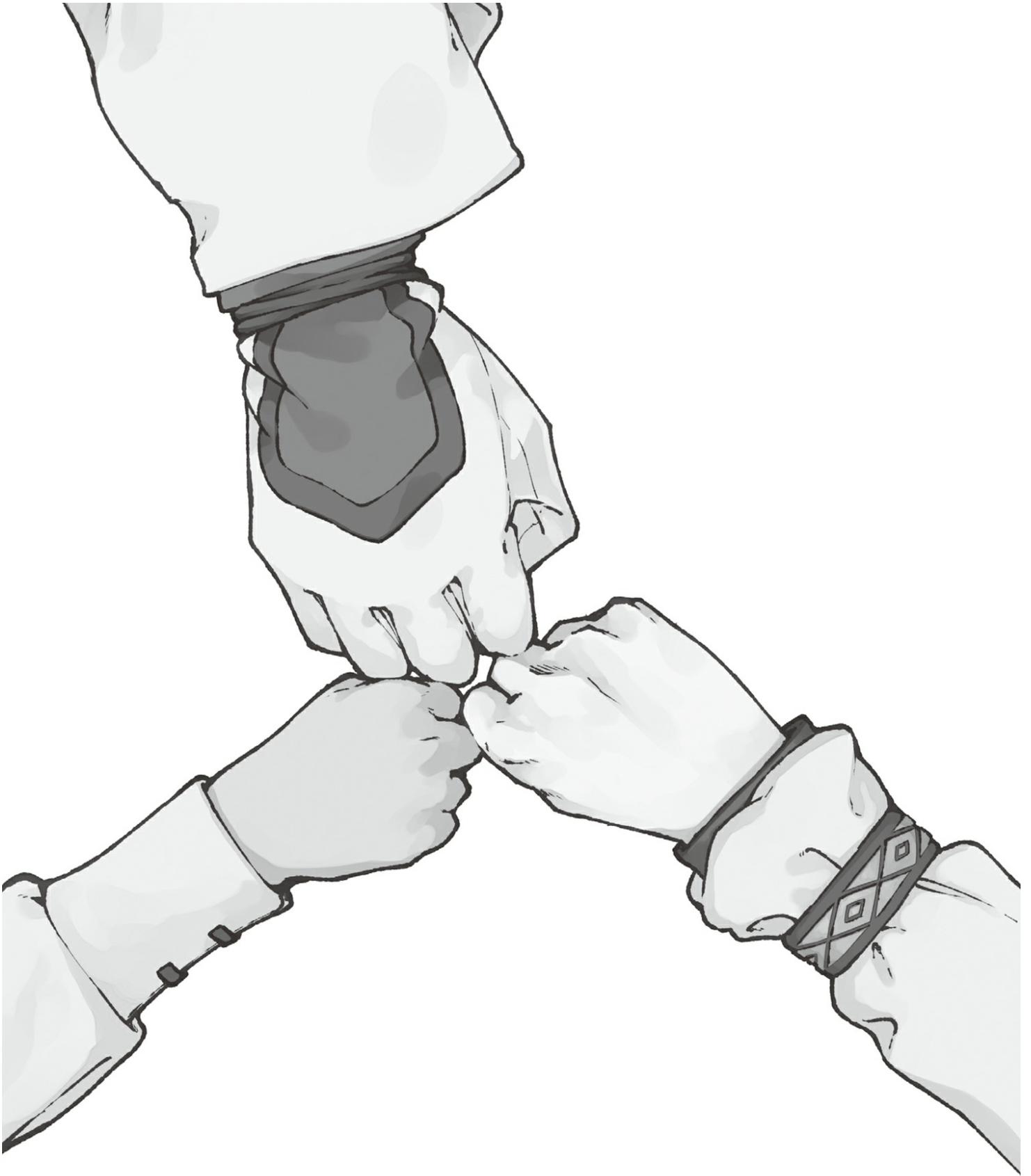
“But... I...!”

Saybil pulled her into an embrace. “Become a hero, Hort. I’ll be right here... Waiting for you to come back and tell me all your epic stories.”

I’ve felt so comfortable with them. They’ve been such reassuring friends to have by my side. But now I have to let them go, Saybil thought. The world needs Hort and Kudo too much for me to tie them down and keep them here with me.

“This isn’t fair. It’s not.” Hort squeezed Saybil back. “I love you so much Sayb, more than anyone else...! I don’t want to be a hero, I want to stay with you! I want to be by your side!”





Hort began to sob.

With an awkward look on his face, Kudo came over and put his arms around them both, stroking Hort's back to comfort her.

Saybil grinned. "Brings back memories, huh?"

"Of what?" Kudo demanded.

"Professor Zero's special field training program. We hugged back then, too, didn't we? We were so happy when we found out that one another were still alive."

Saybil couldn't put words to the emotion welling up inside of him. What he had instead was tears. Not of rage, or sadness, or disappointment—and yet his heart ached, the pain so bad he felt as if he would never be able to stand it on his own.

"I'll become a proper mage, not just a mana merchant. I'll train and train, and no matter how long it takes, I'll be able to fight like you guys someday...!"

"You dumbass...! Ain't no one ever gonna be able to stop you if you get that strong...! Stick with bein' a washout, it suits you better...!"

2

In the end, Kudo and Hort accepted their invitations to join the Mage Battalion, while Saybil declined his. The three of them resolved to continue their research into the Remnants of Disaster each in their own separate ways—Hort and Kudo would pass the information they gathered on their expeditions with the Mage Battalion along to the Forbidden Library for Saybil to

research, verify, and compile.

It was night, and Saybil found himself wandering out of the tower and into town. He found Los sitting in the central square next to a decrepit old washhouse, gazing up at the endlessly falling ash.

Saybil silently took a seat beside her. “Professor Los.”

“Hm?”

“I love you.”

“What art...?! Must thou always be so precipitate?!”

“But it feels like you’re about to leave us.”

Los raised an eyebrow, then sighed. “What makest thou think that?”

“I don’t know. It’s just a feeling... But... It’s like we aren’t your little ducklings anymore.”

“...Quite so.” She sighed again, sounding weary.

The sky was dark, with no moon. The lanterns hanging from the roof of the old washhouse provided the only illumination, a dim glow amid the falling ash.

“Hort and Kudo will mature by leaps and bounds during their time with the Mage Battalion, I expect. I am no longer the hand that guides them.”

“Then what about me?”

“That is what worries me so! It has been touch-and-go, but thou canst now walk thine own path, as thine own teacher. With that in mind, well... Perhaps my work here is done.”

“Even so... Will you stay here? With me?”

“You know I cannot. I am the Dawn Witch, itinerant by my very nature.”

“But my research is always going to be right at the forefront of magical history, I just know it.”

“Bold indeed thou hast grown, to speak so! My, my!”

Los laughed, and wrapped her arms around Saybil’s head to give him a hard noogie. Then her fist unclenched, and she began to stroke his hair.

Saybil looked down. He knew that Fianos, Los’s adopted son, had loved her from the bottom of his heart—that he still did—and knew also that Los had left him nonetheless.

“Why wasn’t Fianos good enough for you?” he asked.

“’Twas not a matter of Fianos’s quality, but of mine.”

“What do you mean?”

“I love all, but can love none deeply.”

Saybil cocked his head. “Is there a reason why?”

“Cowardice.”

“Cowardice...” Saybil repeated.

“Once I believe a thing to be eternal and unchanging, the fear that someday it will warp into something ugly, or break apart entirely, becomes unbearable. Time wears down even the mightiest boulder.”

“So... If I could find a way to prove that my love will never change until the day you die... You’d agree to marry me?”

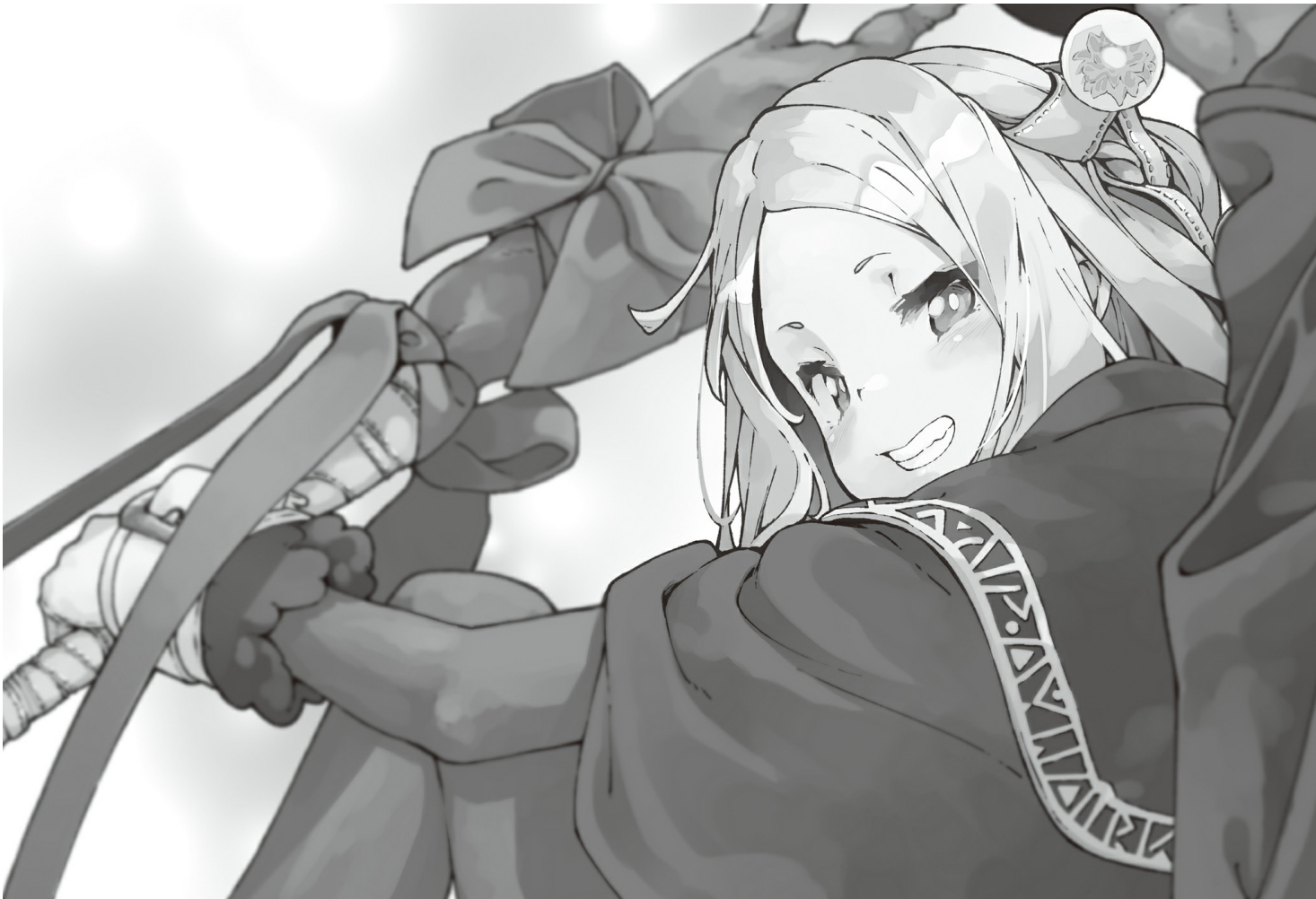
“’Tis impossible to prove that a thing will never change, not while the sands of time still flow.”

“...Then if someday my love for you should change...”

“Yes?”

“If that day ever comes, I’ll kill you, Professor Los. I’ll kill you while you still believe I love you. That way, from your perspective, my love for you will never have changed. It will have lasted forever.”

Los’s eyes opened wide, and she stared intently at Saybil. She was genuinely surprised for the first time in a long, long while, and her cheeks turned a burning red.



“Wh...What manner of confession is this?! Thou hast taken me unawares despite myself, and my heart is all aflutter!”

“Wait, really? So did I find the right answer?”

“Thou dost understand ’twould be a crime for thee to speak those words to any but me?!”

“I won’t. Not to anyone but you.”

“Thou little...! Hrngh...! To think a mere chick would ever speak to me so...!”
Los fanned her reddened face with her hands. “Thou wouldst have to destroy my little Ludens to kill me, of course. Dost truly believe thou couldst find a way to do so, though I have searched in vain for one lo these many long years?”

“I do.”

“Even shouldst thou succeed in doing so...! Thou wouldst need to become stronger even than I to take me by surprise and do the deed.”

“I will,” Saybil declared.

His resolve overwhelmed Los. The ancient witch sighed, holding her head in her hands, then stood up.

“Professor Los?”

“Rejoice in my pardon.”

“Huh?”

She looked over her shoulder at Saybil and grinned. “I have a great love of reckless challenges undertaken by the young. I shall look forward to seeing how far thou canst go.”

Afterword

Hello, Kobashiri here.

I got unprecedentedly terrible results on a recent blood test when I went in for a gastroscopy, and my doctor has strongly advised me to exercise regularly. I used to swim, but I haven't been going for the last couple of years, so maybe this should come as no surprise... At the very least I'd like to get in thirty minutes of walking every day.

If any of you are having a *Come to think of it, I haven't had a checkup in a while* moment, I really think you should go! You can't put this stuff off! Any of us could die at any moment!

Right then, I guess I should talk about the book.

Things have wrapped themselves up surprisingly well, haven't they? So well, in fact, that this might even seem like the end of the series, but the story's going to continue on a little longer. They might be taking different paths, but I have a feeling something will draw our three young mages back together in short order, and Los will surely have her hands full looking out for Saybil.

Zero and Mercenary didn't show up in this volume, but they might in the next one. This *is* the story of the "dawn," after all—magic has only just started to spread across this world, and suddenly here's Saybil, with his unlimited pool of mana. What would happen if everyone in the world really could use magic once

his potions started to spread? And would spreading them even be a good idea in the first place? I've yet to catch a glimpse of any of these stories myself, but I have a feeling there's an infinite number of them waiting for the characters in this tale. If magic really becomes widespread and takes root in this world, if the witch hunters disappear, Zero won't have much reason to stay in that village of hers. At that point, I'm sure she and Mercenary would set out on another journey.

And in volume three, Saybil promised to go back for Laios someday. In just ten years, I bet Laios will be ready to set off on a journey of his own. I wonder what they'll do together, what'll happen to them?

I'd love it if you would accompany them all just a little longer.

Plus, there's the anime to look forward to!

Afterword

The main cast has been announced!
Professor Los and the gang, with voices, moving around... It's like a dream!

I did 11 illustrations for this volume.
I've never done that many before in my whole life as an illustrator!
I think it's pretty unusual for light novels in general!
This is a rare book! A rare book, I tell you!
I really love the new characters in this volume, Ulula and Kukuru (and Fianos).
Please give them a warm welcome.

All right then, see you in the next volume!

Takashi Iwasaki



Kakeru Kobashiri An eternal newbie writer who loves fantasy and beauty-and-the-beast stories above all else. I always insist I'm not a furry because I love robots and monsters, too. Really I just love all relationships that involve some kind of difference.

Illustrator **Takashi Iwasaki** There seems to be a kitten in my house!

The Dawn of the Witch 4

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